

117 Hospitalized After Drinking Holy Water

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More than 100 Russian Orthodox believers have been hospitalized after drinking holy water during Epiphany celebrations in Irkutsk, an official said Monday.

A total of 117 people, including 48 children, were in the hospital complaining of acute intestinal pain after drinking water from wells in and around a local church last week, said Vladimir Salovarov, a spokesman for the Irkutsk branch of the Investigative Committee.

Salovarov said 204 people required some medical treatment after consuming the water, the source of which was a stagnant lake. He said, however, that it was too early to say what caused the illness.

Many Russians consider any water obtained on Epiphany — which they celebrate on Jan. 19 — to be holy.

The water is typically bottled for consumption later. Tap water in most of Russia is undrinkable.

While in western Christian traditions, Epiphany marks the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus, in Eastern Orthodoxy the festival commemorates Christ's baptism.

Orthodox believers also plunge into icy rivers and lakes in their traditional Epiphany celebration. Typically a cross is carved out of the ice near the bathing spot, and a wooden dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit is thrown into the water.

Irkutsk is located in eastern Siberia near the border with China.

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