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Wildfires Kill at Least 25 People

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MASLOVKA — Forest fires sweeping across the European part of Russia on Friday killed at least 25 people and forced the evacuation of thousands in the hottest weather since records began 130 years ago.

Fanned by strong winds, fires ripped through woods and fields that have been scorched for weeks by a heatwave, incinerating hundreds of wooden houses.

"We don't know where to go," said Galina Shibanova, 52, standing outside her burning home in the town of Maslovka in the Voronezh region, about 500 kilometers south of Moscow.

"We called the emergency services, and not one person answered the phone," said Shibanova, a gold crucifix around her neck reflecting the nearby flames.

Health Minister Tatyana Golikova said 439 people had been injured in Voronezh alone and that 43 were hospitalized in serious condition.

Russia has been sweltering since June in a heat wave that has destroyed crops and pushed thousands of farmers to the verge of bankruptcy.

The Emergency Situations Ministry said 238,000 people have been deployed to fight peat and forest fires across 866 square kilometers, an area about the size of Berlin.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin cancelled meetings in Moscow to fly to the Nizhny Novgorod region, where at least 540 homes were destroyed. He ordered his government to allocate 5 billion rubles ($165 million) to help victims.

State television showed a crowd of women surrounding Putin, demanding to know if the government would pay for rebuilding their homes. "Don't worry, don't worry," said Putin. "I promise you the village will be fully rebuilt."

One woman told him, "We are very thankful to you." Putin embraced her and kissed her on the cheek.

President Dmitry Medvedev ordered the military to help fight the fires, and Putin warned that officials who failed to deal properly with the fires would be sacked.

"This is a calamity and could strike other regions," Medvedev told officials by video conference from Moscow.

Residents in Nizhny Novgorod had tried to fight the flames with buckets of water, but state television channel Rossia said 340 houses in one village were destroyed in 20 minutes.

One woman sat weeping in an armchair, surrounded by toys, as her house burned down in front of her, a Reuters witness said. Another sat on a bench clutching religious icons saved from her burning home.

A spokeswoman for the Emergency Situations Ministry said 25 people had died in the fires, including two firefighters. At least 2,178 people have had their homes destroyed.

Thousands were evacuated, including 900 patients from a hospital in Voronezh that was threatened by the flames and 1,200 children from summer camps in Ryazan, the ministry said.

In Maslovka, Alexandra Yuryeva stood in front of her burned-out house in shock, clutching a brown chicken tightly to her chest, the only possession she had left. "In my childhood there was the war. It's impossible. Why can I not die in peace?" the 71-year-old said, as tears streamed down her face.

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