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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Ends Weekends as Fires Kill 28 in Regions

By Alexandra Odynova

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Women weeping near the ruins of a burned-out house in Voronezh on Friday. “Neither fire nor wind have days off, so we can’t take any days off,” Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said. **Sergei Karpukhin**

The traditional August disaster seemed to strike early this year, as wildfires that happen once every few decades killed at least 28 people and burned down 2,210 homes by the start of the month Sunday.

Fourteen regions declared a state of emergency because of fires that followed weeks of a record heat wave and drought in central Russia. About 180,000 people and 18 aircraft were fighting the fires Sunday, and more than 5,200 people had been evacuated nationwide.

President Dmitry Medvedev said fires on this scale only occurred every 30 to 40 years and ordered Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to oversee firefighting efforts and ensure that relief was provided to those affected by the disaster.

Putin promptly ordered local officials, including governors, to work on weekends.

"Neither fire nor wind have days off, so we can't take any days off," Putin said during a videoconference Saturday.

A total of 774 fires covering 128,000 hectares had been registered by Sunday, the Emergency Situations Ministry said on its web site. The area was 7,000 hectares less than Saturday, but the situation was worsened by strong winds reaching 20 meters per second that fueled the fires, the ministry said.

The situation was worst in the Moscow, Voronezh and Nizhny Novgorod regions as well as the Volga Federal District, where both woodland and peat bogs were burning Sunday. About 2,000 children were evacuated from a summer camp in Tolyatti after a state of emergency was declared in the Samara region.

Medvedev had telephone conversations Sunday with several governors, urging them to start providing compensation to local residents as soon as possible, the Kremlin said.

Putin said 3 million rubles ($100,000) would be paid to the owners of each of the 1,875 homes that have been destroyed, and 4.6 billion rubles ($152 million) has been allotted to reconstruct burned houses.

On Medvedev's orders, the army dispatched several battalions and 300 of its own firetrucks to help the firefighters in the Moscow region, Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov said Friday.

Nizhny Novgorod Governor Valery Shantsev said in televised remarks Saturday that the situation there remained grave because thick smoke was preventing firefighting aircraft from pouring water on the blazes.

On Friday, Putin visited Verkhnyaya Vereya, a village in the Nizhny Novgorod region that lost all 341 of its houses to fire. Local residents told him that they blamed officials for sluggish reaction to the fire. That prompted Putin to call on mayors who face criticism from residents over the fires to resign.

At least one official has decided to follow the recommendation. Alexei Sokolov, head of the Vyksa district, which includes Verkhnyaya Vereya and where at least 550 houses had burned down, has filed his resignation with the local legislature. But no one has been available to accept it so far because all deputies are busy fighting fires, Interfax reported Sunday.

Residents in fire-hit areas expressed worries about what might happen next.

Natalya Biryukova, an accountant from Kuzmiyar, a small town in the Novgorod region, said the town has been blanketed in smoke for several days.

"The situation was terrifying three days ago when the fire was seen 1 1/2 kilometers away from the town," she said by cell phone, the line constantly disconnecting because of damage to local cell phone infrastructure.

"Now the fire has been fought back into the forest and is staying there only," she said.

Still, the town administration evacuated children and women, as well as several patients from a local psychiatric hospital, as the fire neared the town, Biryukova said. "The residents were frightened," she said.

No buildings have been scorched by fire in Kuzmiyar so far.

Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu told journalists Saturday that more efforts are needed to prevent destruction in regions.

"The situation may become complicated in the 17 regions where fires have been detected," Shoigu said.

He said the Vladimir and Moscow regions face the worst threat because of burning peat bogs.

The government has decided to purchase seven additional aircraft — two planes and five helicopters — to add to the 18 aircraft already fighting the fires, Shoigu said.

Offers for help are also coming from abroad. Sergei Shamba, prime minister of Georgia's separatist region of Abkhazia, said Sunday that local Black Sea resorts were ready to offer vacation trips to 1,000 children whose houses were destroyed in the fire, Interfax reported.

Germany has offered to help clean up the destruction caused by wildfires and build temporary housing for those left homeless.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill ordered all local churches to hold services to pray for rain and urged believers to join in.

"The disastrous events reflect both on the economy and the spiritual state of people," Kirill said during a visit Sunday to the village of Diveyevo in the Nizhny Novgorod region, Interfax reported.

August is commonly known as the month of disasters in Russia, starting with the government debt default on Aug. 17, 1998, that led to the ruble's devaluation and a financial crisis. Other August disasters have included the sinking of the Kursk nuclear submarine in 2000, passenger jet bombings in 2004 and the accident at the Sayano-Shushenskaya hydropower station in Siberia last year that killed 75.

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