The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Shoigu Says Wildfires Out of Control

By Alexandra Odynova

August 03, 2010



Medvedev greeting firefighters as Shoigu, left, looks on during a visit to Fire Station No. 35 near Sochi on Tuesday. **Dmitry Astakhov**

The authorities conceded Tuesday that wildfires were burning out of control as another 47,000 hectares went up in flames and fires ravaged a military base, threatened a nuclear research center and left hundreds of people homeless.

The Prosecutor General's Office said it would investigate a fire that swept through a military base just southeast of Moscow in the Kolomna district of the Moscow region on Sunday.

"The fire destroyed base quarters, the accountant's office, a club, two garages, 13 hangars with aviation equipment of various kinds and 17 parking areas with vehicles located there," the Prosecutor General's Office said in a statement.

The news web site Lifenews.ru reported that the blaze destroyed or damaged 200 aircraft and caused damages of about 20 billion rubles ($670 million).

The Defense Ministry initially denied the fire before confirming it Tuesday.

The base was not identified, but the town of Shchurov hosts a supply base that provides ammunition and equipment for both the Navy and the Air Force and stores more than 65,000 tons of various equipment, the local weekly Ugol Zreniya reported in March.

Meanwhile, wildfires burned dangerously close to Sarov, a town in the Nizhny Novgorod region that acts as the country's nuclear research center and is off-limits to foreigners, prompting Rosatom chief Sergei Kiriyenko to fly to the town to personally oversee firefighting efforts.

The smoke was so thick in the area that firefighting planes were flying in zero visibility, using data from flight dispatchers and thermographic cameras to target the fires, the Emergency Situations Ministry said.

The total area consumed by fires nationwide reached 172,000 hectares on Tuesday morning, up from 125,000 hectares the previous day, the ministry said.

"Over the weekend, the number of fires has doubled in some places and quadrupled elsewhere," Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu said, adding that some were "out of control."

The death toll remained unchanged at 40, but the number of people who had lost their homes to the fires increased from 2,210 to about 3,000.

Shoigu said firefighters managed to protect 360 settlements from fires during the past 24 hours.

More than 155,700 people are fighting fires nationwide, including 1,500 soldiers from the Defense Ministry.

The number of aircraft engaged in firefighting rose to 60 after Ukraine dispatched two An-32 planes and Azerbaijan returned two helicopters purchased from Russia two years ago, Shoigu said.

President Dmitry Medvedev, who is on a working vacation in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, said firefighters should be provided with modern facilities and equipment. Visiting a local fire station, Medvedev also ordered the drafting of a new bill making owners of dachas responsible for maintaining fire safety on their land.

He said 5 billion rubles ($167 million) has been set aside to compensate people who lost homes or other property in the fire.

In a bid to prevent corruption from draining the money away, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said house rebuilding sites will be placed under round-the-clock video surveillance.

"One camera will broadcast the feed to the government's building, another to my own home and a third to the prime minister's web site," Putin said during a meeting with the residents of the fire-ravaged village of Mokhovoye in the Moscow region.

He also promised to put "tough administrative control over everything that happens in the forests" by giving the regions more authority over woodland safety.

Environmentalists have blamed Putin for contributing to the disaster by signing the 2007 Forest Code, which crippled the woodland fire control system by slashing the number of people who supervise forests by 75 percent.

Moscow region Governor Boris Gromov said rebuilding work in his region would begin by Friday. He also said his administration would tackle smoldering local peat bogs by drenching them with water to prevent future fires. He said this effort would take up to four years and cost about 20 billion rubles to 25 billion rubles ($670 million to $840 million).

The breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia offered humanitarian aid to Russia, while personnel at the Kazakh Embassy in Moscow donated 500,000 tenge ($3,390) to victims of wildfires.

Leningrad Governor Valery Serdyukov said his region, which has not been affected by fires, could house and find employment for people left homeless. The regional employment service has 720 available vacancies, he said in a statement, without elaborating.

The Liberal Democratic Party pledged to donate 4 million rubles ($134,000) to people affected by the fires.

It was unclear Tuesday when the current dry and hot weather that enabled the wildfires to spread might change. Weather forecasters said there would be no significant weather changes until at least next week.

Moscow remained blanketed in smog Tuesday, and the temperature was expected to reach a new all-time high of 38 degrees Celsius.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/08/03/shoigu-says-wildfires-out-of-control-a370