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Medvedev Fires 5 as Moscow Chokes

By Alexandra Odynova

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A train pushing through thick haze in the Oktyabrskoye Pole metro station in northwestern Moscow on Wednesday. Muscovites have been advised by the government to wear masks. **Vladimir Filonov**

Moscow residents choked on a thick, gray smog that seeped into apartments, offices and even underground metro stations Wednesday as raging wildfires billowed lung-aching smoke into the air.

President Dmitry Medvedev, who cut short a working vacation in Sochi to return to the capital, dismissed five senior military officials for not preventing a wildfire from roaring through a base in the Moscow region and threatened to show "no sympathy" toward any other government official found liable in connection with the fires.

The death toll climbed to 48 as firefighters battled 520 fires covering 188,525 hectares, the Emergency Situations Ministry said. About 667,460 hectares have burned since the start of the fire season on April 1.

Medvedev applauded the Emergency Situations Ministry for working "to the limit of its

ability" but said he saw "criminal negligence" in the Defense Ministry for failing to prevent the fire at the aviation supply base near Kolomna on Sunday.

"Everything that happened was the simple nonfulfillment of duties — criminal negligence," Medvedev said at a Security Council meeting.

He complained that the base's commander and other senior officials were nowhere to be found as the fire slowly made its way toward the base.

Medvedev fired the commander, who was not identified, as well as the chief of the Navy's aviation unit, Nikolai Kuklev; his deputy, Sergei Rasskazov; and two senior logistics officials. He also reprimanded Navy commander Vladimir Vysotsky and his deputy, Alexander Tatarinov.

"If something similar happens in other places, in other agencies, I'll do exactly the same thing, with no sympathy," Medvedev said.

Sunday's fire destroyed the base's headquarters and engulfed 17 parking lots with vehicles, 13 warehouses filled with aviation equipment, the base's accounting office, a club and two garages, the Investigative Committee said.

Media reports have said 200 aircraft were destroyed in the blaze.

Moscow residents woke up to the thickest smog in years Wednesday morning as smoke from forest fires and smoldering peat bogs in the Moscow region settled heavily over the city.

Air pollution reached a "critical level" overnight and was 10 times higher than acceptable levels in the morning, the federal pollution-monitoring agency said in a statement. It urged Moscow residents to wear thick, eight-layer face masks outdoors.

The country's chief lung doctor, Alexander Chuchalin, has said such air pollution is equal to about two packs of cigarettes smoked within three or four hours and could result in chronic diseases.

The temperature in Moscow, meanwhile, reached its third all-time record in as many weeks, peaking at 38 degrees Celsius, the federal weather bureau said.

Health officials said the situation, which was not expected to improve until Friday at the earliest, had become dangerous even for healthy people and advised Moscow residents to stay indoors until the evening.

Some companies urged their staff to work from home if possible.

Russia's chief public doctor, Gennady Onishchenko, warned Muscovites to engage in minimal physical activity and "put aside all hard work."

More than a dozen regions, including the Moscow region, have declared a state of emergency over wildfires, and the Moscow region administration announced Wednesday that it had extended its state of emergency to Sept. 15.

"The situation in the Moscow region remains tense," the regional branch of the Emergency Situations Ministry said in a statement, adding that the number of fires around Moscow had slightly decreased.

Three firefighting trains were dispatched to the Moscow region to extinguish fires, it said.

The Moscow region administration said journalists would be barred from forests without special accreditation for safety reasons.

Checks of the forests in the Moscow region have found that none of them meet fire-safety rules and uncovered 66 violations, the Federal Veterinary and Phytosanitary Inspection Service said in a statement.

Medvedev called for the development of a better fire-safety system by next summer.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin flew to Voronezh on Wednesday, where he met with officials, local residents and firefighters.

"The situation with forest fires in the country has on the whole stabilized but remains tense and dangerous," Putin said, according to a transcript on the government web site.

Prosecutors in the Nizhny Novgorod region promised to file negligence charges against unspecified officials in connection with wildfires that burned down hundreds of houses and resulted in at least 20 deaths over the past week. A conviction for negligence carries up to seven years in prison.

Local officials said construction would start Thursday on new homes to replace the 648 destroyed in the region's Vyksa district.

Mission Control asked cosmonauts on the international space station to take pictures of the wildfires, Interfax reported.

The wildfires were burning just 10 kilometers from the outskirts of Sarov, a closed town in the Nizhny Novgorod region that serves as the country's nuclear research center. Rosatom, the state nuclear corporation, said there was no danger of any explosions in Sarov because all radioactive materials had been removed.

Firefighters extinguished a wildfire about four kilometers from the Novovoronezhskaya nuclear power station, located 50 kilometers south of the city of Voronezh, Rosatom chief Sergei Kiriyenko said at the Security Council meeting.

Ukraine sent two An-32 aircraft to the Voronezh region to participate in firefighting efforts.

The country may also help Russia by providing treatment and sanitarium vacations for Russians affected by the fires, Ukrainian First Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Klyuev said.

Belarus plans to dispatch two helicopters and 20 firefighting vehicles to Russia, Interfax reported.

The Communist Party said all its officials would donate one day's wages to people affected by

the fires, while the Public Chamber announced a donation drive with Sberbank.

The Russian Orthodox Church, which has linked the disaster to the sins of Russians and urged people to seek forgiveness, is also collecting humanitarian aid.

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