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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

State Allots $1.8Bln for Firefighters

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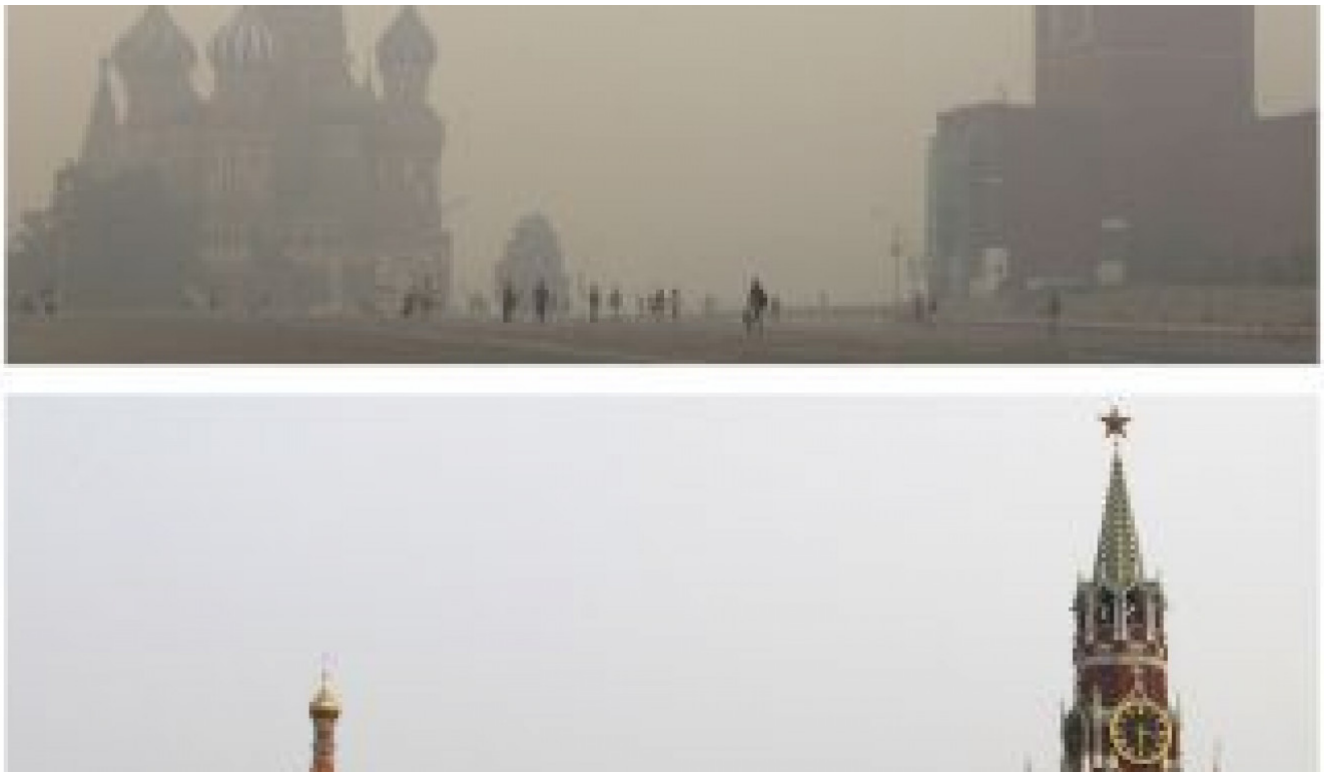

Red Square in smog, top, and after winds had blown across the square a few hours later on Monday.
Alexander Demianchuk

The government on Monday backed a plan to spend 54 billion rubles ($1.8 billion) on state-of-the-art firefighting aircraft and trucks for the Emergency Situations Ministry, which is under enormous strain as it fights wildfires in central Russia.

Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu also proposed the creation of emergency response centers across the country to deal with disasters like the fires, which resulted from Russia's worst heat wave in 1,000 years.

The ministry asked the government to back a bill allowing it to recruit volunteer firefighters, especially in remote areas, Shoigu said. Thanks to a similar law, the United States has four times as many firefighters per 1,000 people as Russia, he said.

Another problem is that the private companies that are often employed by regional governments to battle fires are poorly prepared to face a large-scale disaster like the current

blazes, Shoigu said.

He conceded that the Emergency Situations Ministry's firefighting force is not very efficient, saying it is trained to fight fires in apartments and factories, not forests.

But the firefighting efforts are yielding results despite all the shortcomings, Shoigu told reporters after a weekly meeting of the Presidium, the downsized Cabinet.

"The situation is no doubt better than three days ago," Shoigu said, adding that firefighters put out or significantly reduced blazes in several regions, including Tula and Tambov.

But in the Nizhny Novgorod region, fires continued to rage despite the deployment of four times as many firefighters as those who fought the disastrous fires in California that razed 1,700 houses over two days in 2007, Shoigu said, without elaborating.

The ministry is amassing a major airborne force in the Moscow region, where the situation also remains dire, to combat forest fires once visibility permits, Shoigu said.

A heavy smog from forest and peat bog fires has blanketed the capital and the Moscow region for the past four days.

Shoigu pledged to have all wildfires in the Moscow region extinguished in five to seven days, his ministry said in a statement on its web site.

The number of people killed in the wildfires remained at 52 on Monday, while the number of destroyed houses stayed at about 2,000. Fires covered an area of 174,000 hectares nationwide, Shoigu's ministry said.

Meanwhile, approaching flames forced the town of Ozersk in the Chelyabinsk region — which hosts a huge nuclear waste storage and recycling facility — to declare a state of emergency Monday.

On Friday, the fire approached another Chelyabinsk region town, Snezhinsk, which hosts the Federal Nuclear Center, but the blaze was beaten back by Monday, Interfax reported.

In Moscow, officials said the death rate in the city has doubled since the start of the fires.

"The average death rate in the city during normal times is between 360 and 380 people per day. Now we have about 700," Andrei Seltsovsky, head of Moscow's health department, said at a city government meeting.

He said heat strokes were the prime reason for the increase, which left city morgues on the brink of overcrowding, with 1,300 bodies stored, close to their maximal capacity of 1,500.

Health and Social Development Minister Tatyana Golikova said she was "surprised" by Seltsovsky's figures and asked him to explain where he got his data from.

Her ministry said the death rate in Moscow between January and June had actually decreased by 9 percent compared with the same period in 2009.

President Dmitry Medvedev warned politicians not to use the fires to boost their political

clout during a visit to Ioshkar-Ola, capital of the Marii-El republic, one of the seven areas where he declared a state of emergency last week.

"One shouldn't engage in political PR ... because of a disaster, especially if it doesn't depend on the authorities," Medvedev said.

He also dismissed the suggestion that heads of districts ravaged by wildfires should be dismissed for letting houses burn, saying they could not be held responsible for natural disasters.

Medvedev also spoke against punishing officials who cut trees without permission to save villages from fire.

Federal law only allows trees to be cut down within a 50-meter radius of a locality as a fire prevention measure. Medvedev said the limit should be increased to 200 or 300 meters.

Medvedev also threatened to fire forestry officials who refused to end their vacations because of wildfires, such as the head of the Moscow region forest agency, Sergei Gordeichenko.

Mayor Yury Luzhkov avoided coming under the president's fire by interrupting a European vacation Sunday, although not before being lambasted by the press for having stayed away from the city.

But his deputy Vladimir Resin said Monday that the mayor had controlled the situation in the capital even when formally off-duty. Resin said Luzhkov was giving orders at least four times a day during his vacation, Interfax reported.

"The measures he was taking through me and the administration helped decrease the fires by up to 7 to 8 percent," Resin added, without elaborating. "The matter is not where the mayor is, but how he governs."

Luzhkov, known for his love of beekeeping, has taken care to shelter his bees from fires in expensive, specially designed hives, Lifenews.ru tabloid reported Monday, adding that no bees have died from the disaster.

Resin said things were looking up.

"I believe that this week there will be a turning point, and God is with us," he told journalists.

Alexander Frolov, head of the Federal Meteorological Service, agreed, saying temperatures might dip on Wednesday when rains and a change in wind direction are expected.

The smog was already clearing up by Monday evening.

Frolov, speaking on Rossia-24 television, also said official archives have found that this year's heat wave is the worst in 1,000 years. He did not elaborate on the sources for the data. Moscow began keeping meteorological records 130 years ago.

Frolov said his service was planning to join forces with the Russian Academy of Sciences to create a scientific center for the study of weather and climate changes.

The smog that has blanketed Moscow caused the U.S. Embassy to cancel nonimmigrant interviews on Monday, promising to reschedule them at unspecified later dates. The embassy's American Citizen Services unit operated as usual.

The German Embassy said in an e-mailed statement that earlier reports of it "halting operations" were incorrect and it was working "at a reduced level."

Moscow's airports faced no delays Monday, the Federal Air Transportation Agency said.

Almost 64,000 flights and 1 million passengers nationwide have been delayed by smog since the start of wildfires in June, the Federal Meteorological Service said.

City officials, meanwhile, ordered Moscow clinics to stay open round the clock and limited sales of facemasks to 10 per customer to prevent price gouging.

Seltsovsky of the city's health care department said Moscow has no shortage of facemasks, with 3.2 million in stock.

But he said unspecified individuals had resold thousands of masks for 50 rubles ($1.60) apiece after buying them at drugstores for 7 rubles each, RIA-Novosti reported.

The Federal Anti-Monopoly Service pledged in a statement to look in to the prices of fans and air conditioners after they jumped during the heat wave.

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