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Co-Pilot Putin Helps Put Out Wildfires

By Alexandra Odynova

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin fighting forest fires in the Ryazan region on Tuesday from the co-pilot's seat of an amphibious plane. He doused two fires, media reported. **Alexei Nikolsky**

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin took the pilot's seat in the government's fight against wildfires Tuesday, hopping on a firefighting plane to put out two blazes in the Ryazan region.

Putin, wearing a blue shirt and jeans, boarded a Russian-built Be-200 amphibious aircraft as a passenger for a flight over the Ryazan region. But he later went into the cockpit and sat in the co-pilot's seat, holding the throttle and pushing a button to dump 24 tons of water on forest fires about 200 kilometers southeast of Moscow.

Footage on Channel One television showed Putin hitting the button and asking the pilot, "Was that OK?"

The pilot replied, "A direct hit!"

Putin, who has no known pilot training, is no stranger to the co-pilot's seat, operating a

Tu-160 supersonic heavy bomber during the MAKS air show in 2005 and flying in a Su-27 jet over Chechnya in 2000.

After the firefighting flight, Putin visited the Ryazan regional village of Kriusha, where wildfires have destroyed 54 houses, and met with residents. He once again pledged that everyone who had lost a home would be paid cash compensation or receive a new house. Regardless of the size of the burned house, claimants can only collect up to 2 million rubles ($66,600), Putin said.

The residents complained that their village did not have a firetruck, and Putin said the government planned to purchase more firetrucks in the future. He also promised to build a school, kindergarten and a sports center in the village.

Ahead of his visit to the Ryazan region, Putin met with Mayor Yury Luzhkov and praised him for ending a trip to Europe "in due time."

Luzhkov left Russia on Aug. 2 for what his spokesman Sergei Tsoi initially described as a vacation and later as a trip to seek treatment for an unspecified sports injury. He flew back Sunday night after initially resisting calls to return as thick smog cloaked Moscow.

An unidentified Kremlin official told Interfax on Tuesday that Luzhkov should have returned to Moscow earlier because his absence "didn't contribute to making the necessary decisions on time."

Luzhkov, who faced no criticism from Putin at their meeting, called the situation in Moscow "not simple, but under control," even as a blue sky appeared over the city for the first time since last Thursday.

Putin also asked Luzhkov to assist in reconstructing houses in the Ryazan and Voronezh regions, which together with the Moscow region are among the seven regions where the government has declared a state of emergency because of the fires. With Luzhkov overseeing the wealthiest economic center in the country, he is often asked to help out in needier areas. His billionaire wife, Yelena Baturina, owns the Inteko construction company.

Putin said during his visit to the Ryazan region that Luzhkov agreed to provide 1 billion to 1.5 billion rubles from a reserve fund.

He suggested that the Federal Forestry Agency be placed under the Cabinet's control. The agency now answers to the Agriculture Ministry.

The economic damage caused by the wildfires amounts to about $15 billion, equal to 1 percent of Russia's gross domestic product, Kommersant reported Tuesday. The government has not tallied the economic cost yet, although economists largely agreed with Kommersant's estimate.

Luzhkov, at a City Hall meeting, blamed Moscow region officials for the peat bog fires that fueled the smog in the capital, saying they had ignored fire safety measures drafted after fires caused similar smog during the summer of 2002.

"At our initiative, the Russian government in 2002 ordered that protective measures be

drafted against peat bog fires. They were prepared, but no one is fulfilling them," Luzhkov said, adding that those guilty must be punished. He did not elaborate on who is to blame.

But the ax fell Tuesday on the director of the Moscow regional branch of the forestry agency, Sergei Gordeichenko, who resisted calls last week to end a vacation to deal with the fires. Agriculture Minister Yelena Skrynnik ordered Gordeichenko's dismissal.

President Dmitry Medvedev threatened to fire forestry officials who refuse to end their vacations Monday.

The situation with fires in the Moscow region remained "tense" on Tuesday, the regional branch for the Emergency Situations Ministry said in a statement. At least 37 fires were burning on about 190 hectares, it said.

In all, fires were burning on about 174,000 hectares around Russia on Tuesday, the Emergency Situations Ministry said in a statement. In addition to 165,700 Russians, about 400 foreign firefighters were deployed with 52 planes, helicopters, firetrucks and other equipment, it said.

They were joined Monday by a group of U.S. fire experts from the U.S. Agency for International Development, who arrived in Moscow following a telephone conversation between U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Friday, the State Department said.

Environmentalists warned on Tuesday that the fires have reached forests in the Bryansk region, bordering Ukraine, which is polluted with radioactive emissions from the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

Greenpeace said at least 20 fires were burning in the area as of Monday, including three in highly polluted forests. It cited a satellite map of the fires provided by the Fire Information for Resource Management, a fire monitoring agency based at the University of Maryland.

The Emergency Situations Ministry denied that there were any fires in the Bryansk region's polluted forests.

The top health official in the Moscow region, Vladimir Semyonov, told journalists that the region's death rate had increased by 25 percent within three weeks, Interfax reported. He added that comparative figures for previous years were not available yet.

Moscow's top health official said Monday that the number of deaths had doubled since the start of the fires.

Luzhkov said Tuesday that ambulances calls have risen by nearly a quarter since the heat wave struck the city in late June.

To provide heat- and smog-weary Moscow residents with some relief, city authorities have organized free admission from Tuesday to Sunday to select movie theaters, including the Neva, Khudozhestveny, Svoboda, Fakel, Ulan-Bator, Vladivostok and Sputnik, the city's culture department said. It said the moviegoers would be supplied with free water.

The Norwegian Embassy in Moscow has suspended visa applications for individuals and tour groups, joining the U.S., German and other embassies in cutting back their workload amid the heat and smog. It is still possible to apply for a Norwegian visa via the country's consulate general in St. Petersburg.

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