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War Veteran Kills 9 in Suicide Blaze

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A World War II veteran set fire to himself in a nursing home in a Tver regional town early Monday, sparking a blaze that killed himself and at least eight other residents in the understaffed facility.

The 86-year-old veteran, Nikolai Dudin, was dismayed about not receiving a free apartment from the state that would have allowed him to move out of the nursing home, and he died hours before he was to be decorated with a medal for his valor in World War II, officials said.

The fire broke out in the town of Vyshny Volochyok, located about 300 kilometers northwest of Moscow, at about 4 a.m. Monday on the third floor of a seven-story nursing home for the elderly and people with special needs, the regional branch of the Emergency Situations Ministry said in a statement.

Dudin died of his burns, while eight other elderly people on his floor died of smoke inhalation, the ministry said. Two other residents were hospitalized with unspecified injuries.

A torch and an empty fuel can were found in the burned-out ward, the Investigative Committee said in a statement.

It wasn't clear Monday how Dudin managed to obtain the fuel at the nursing home.

A senior Emergency Situations Ministry official said the death toll would have been lower if the nursing home had more staff. Just 14 staff members were on duty in the home, which housed 458 residents, said the official, Yury Deshyovykh.

"One of the main reasons for what happened is a shortage in personnel," Deshyovykh said on Rossia-24 state television.

The details about what prompted Dudin to light the blaze were sketchy. Vadim Shlyakov, a regional deputy prosecutor, said in televised remarks from the fire scene that Dudin's actions were "connected to his difficulties in getting accommodation." He did not elaborate.

The town's administration said Dudin was to have received money from the state to purchase a new apartment in October.

World War II veterans are eligible for free housing under a much-delayed program initiated by Boris Yeltsin's Kremlin in the 1990s. President Dmitry Medvedev ramped up efforts to dole out the housing ahead of the Victory Day celebrations last May 9, which marked the 65th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Dudin had lived in three nursing homes in recent years and was supposed to be awarded a medal for the liberation of Belarus in World War II on Monday, the town's administration said in a statement.

Medvedev ordered that assistance be provided to those injured in the fire and compensation be paid to the families of those who died, the Kremlin said. He also called for the nursing home to be repaired as soon as possible.

The fire damaged only the third floor of the building, which was built in 1988, emergency officials said.

The first four floors of the building were allotted to residents who could not move without assistance, the Investigative Committee said.

Residents from the third floor have been moved to other floors of the nursing home, a spokeswoman for the Emergency Situations Ministry's local branch told The Moscow Times.

The Prosecutor General's Office has taken control of an investigation into the blaze.

While a shortage of staff was blamed in part for the fire, a single nurse managed to evacuate 45 residents from a burning special-needs residential facility in the Ulyanovsk region early Monday, sparing the facility of any injuries, the regional branch of the Emergency Situations Ministry said.

The fire broke out at about 3 a.m. Monday in one of four wooden buildings that make up the facility in the village of Dalny.

"When the fire started, 45 people were inside Building No. 1. All of them were evacuated to neighboring facilities with the help of a single nurse," the ministry said in a statement.

The ministry said it would present the nurse, Galina Titova, 46, with an award.

A preliminary investigation indicated that arson was to blame for the fire at the facility, which houses a total of 161 people.

In the Irkutsk region, a fire broke out on the roof of a wooden kindergarten building in the village of Petrovka on Monday morning. No one was injured, Interfax reported.

Last winter, Medvedev initiated a crackdown on lax fire-safety standards after fires killed 23 people in a nursing home in the Komi republic and 156 people in a nightclub in Perm.

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