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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

First Regional Chiefs Quit Over Wildfires

By Alexandra Odynova

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A man firefighting this summer in the western part of Russia. **Olga Razumovskaya**

Three senior Volgograd regional officials resigned Monday over their handling of wildfires after coming under criticism from the Kremlin.

Igor Pikalov, a deputy governor who headed Volgograd's emergency situations commission, filed his resignation along with heads of the worst-affected Kotovo and Rudnya districts, Alexander Kazachkov and Viktor Morozov, the Kremlin said in a statement.

"I think I had no choice. Seven dead people is too high a price for negligence," Pikalov said, Interfax reported Monday.

Wildfires broke out in the Volgograd region on Thursday, killing seven, injuring eight and destroying about 700 houses before being extinguished the next day. The fires followed weeks of blazes in the summer that ravaged central Russia and gave the federal government a new headache ahead of October regional elections.

The Kremlin sharply criticized regional authorities over the most recent fires, making a U-turn from an earlier policy of not holding local officials responsible and labeling the summer fires as a natural disaster.

The Prosecutor General's Office has completed an investigation into fire safety violations in the Volgograd region ordered by President Dmitry Medvedev on Saturday and is preparing to file its findings in court, the Kremlin said.

On Sunday, the Investigative Committee's Volgograd branch opened a criminal case into negligence charges, punishable by up to seven years in prison. But no officials were charged as of Monday.

Volgograd Governor Anatoly Brovko criticized the three outgoing officials Monday as “directly responsible for the situation" with the wildfires, Interfax reported.

Alexei Titkov, an analyst with the Institute of Regional Politics, said the resignations were unavoidable after Medvedev's pointed criticism.

"It's a chance to show that the federal authorities are keeping an eye on the situation," Titkov said by telephone.

"But the Volgograd resignations are unlikely to affect other regions because the fires are decreasing due to weather changes," he added.

New fires also broke out late last week in the Saratov and Samara regions. The Emergency Situations Ministry said Monday that the number of fires nationwide had increased seven times over the past 24 hours, from 70 to 501 hectares.

The only other official who has stepped down amid the wildfires is Alexei Sokolov, head of the Nizhny Novgorod region's Vyksa district, where fires killed 22 people and destroyed 660 houses last month.

Sokolov first quit in August, but local lawmakers refused to accept his resignation. He refiled his resignation Friday, Interfax said, adding that his decision was only made public Monday.

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