

Cleanup Starts After Arms Depot Fire

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The Defense Ministry's top weapons official clung to his job Monday as de-mining specialists swept the grounds of an Urals arms depot ravaged by a weekend fire, dodging the occasional blast from still smoldering artillery.

Alexander Romanovsky, who heads the ministry's Main Artillery Directorate, faces dismissal for the three-day fire in the Udmurtia republic and a similar blaze in Bashkortostan two weeks earlier, Itar-Tass reported, citing an unidentified ministry official.

But another Defense Ministry official told Interfax that Romanovsky had been placed in charge of investigating the Udmurtia fire.

No time frame was set for the probe.

President Dmitry Medvedev threatened on Friday to fire any officials found responsible for not preventing the arms depot fires.

The Udmurtia blaze, tentatively blamed on a discarded cigarette, destroyed at least half of the depot's cache of 150,000 tons of old ammunition.

Flying shrapnel injured 100 people, 42 of whom were in the hospital Monday, and prompted 2,000 others to seek psychological help, Interfax said. The fate of conscript Timur Miniakhmetov, who went missing while combating the fire, remained unclear Monday.

The fire was officially declared over Sunday, but blasts continued Monday at the rate of one or two per hour, the Itar-Tass source said.

Railroad and automobile traffic in the area resumed, as did supplies in a Transneft oil pipeline shut down Friday, the company said in a statement carried by the news portal Energo-news.ru.

At least 2,800 homes and several dozen municipal buildings in 11 villages were hit by the bombardment, with damages estimated at 1 billion rubles (\$35 million), said the regional administration's top construction official, Sergei Shikalov, according to Interfax.

The administration promised over the weekend to compensate residents for material damages caused by the fire. Adult residents received 1,000 rubles (\$36) each on Monday, an administration spokesman told Interfax. No further compensation was mentioned.

The arms depot was damaged beyond repair and will be shut down, the same as the facility in Bashkortostan, the Itar-Tass source said.

The Bashkortostan blaze, which was blamed on a soldier mishandling old ammunition, injured 12 people and destroyed 40 buildings, including 14 residential ones.

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