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Fierce Winds Feed Flames in Zabaikalsky Fires

By Roland Oliphant

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Gale-force winds are making it difficult for firefighters to put out blazes in the Zabaikalsky region. Above, a fire in a Ryazan region forest in 2010. **Maxim Stulov**

Firefighters battled adverse weather conditions Friday as they struggled to control wildfires on the Mongolian border.

Steppe fires fueled by strong winds destroyed 20 houses in the southern part of the Zabaikalsky region Thursday night and early Friday.

Firefighting aircraft dispatched to help extinguish fires in a remote part of the Zabaikalsky region were grounded at least until Saturday morning because the same gale-force winds that are spreading the fire make it impossible to fly, regional governor Ravil Geniatulin said.

"We cannot use the air force because of strong winds, simply terrifyingly strong winds, and secondly because the lakes are still frozen, so it is impossible [for the plane] to take

on water," Geniatulin told Prime Minister Vladimir Putin via video link Friday, according to a transcript of the conversation on the government's website.

Geniatulin said the fire that destroyed 20 houses in the village of Onon-Baza had been put out by Friday morning.

He promised to begin rebuilding the destroyed houses by summer. The regional administration has appealed to Moscow for financial assistance in looking after those made homeless by the fires, his office said Friday.

Officials in the region's Aginsky district told Interfax Siberia that the steppe fires were still burning, but said there was no threat to people or property.

Fires this year have also affected Primorye region in the Far East, where firefighters said they had put out five of six forest fires Friday. Meanwhile, reed bed fires that broke out in Astrakhan Nature Reserve in the Volga delta late last month are thought to be burning still.

Wildfires could threaten over 12,000 cities, towns and villages in the coming year, an Emergency Situations Ministry forecaster said Friday, RIA-Novosti reported. The Sverdlovsk, Chelyabinsk, Tyumen, Omsk and Amur regions are particularly vulnerable, he said.

Wildfires affected 1.67 million hectares of land last year, according to the Emergency Situations Ministry, and 2.45 million in 2010, when smog from burning forests and peat bogs smothered Moscow.

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