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Freak Explosions Rock Orenburg

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Four kilotons of munitions, including shells, aerial bombs and Uragan missiles, exploded in three separate blasts on a train being unloaded at an Orenburg region Army base Tuesday.

The blasts sent a white mushroom cloud of smoke and shrapnel more than a kilometer into the air, Interfax reported, adding that the munitions were to be scrapped via controlled explosions.

The incident took place at the Donguz base about 12:50 p.m. No casualties were reported.

Local emergency officials told RIA-Novosti that the blasts were triggered by a fire at the Donguz base's ammunition-unloading station. Defense officials, however, said the shells spontaneously ignited.

Media reports and official accounts differed widely on the damage caused by the explosions, with a Defense Ministry spokesman flatly denying that the blasts had affected homes in the surrounding area.

But Orenburg Governor Yury Berg's spokesman told Interfax that several homes in the nearby town of Pervomaisky were severely damaged.

Local news site 56orb.ru earlier reported, citing residents, that the explosions brought down roofs and felled trees in the town of Donguz.

In Orenburg, the regional capital, some 30 kilometers from the Donguz base, residents said they felt shock waves from the blasts.

Despite emergency workers' efforts to evacuate more than 10,000 people from towns within a 10-kilometer radius of the base, only 19 residents agreed to leave. Others feared leaving their homes unattended.

“The residents were more afraid of looters than the explosions,” an emergency worker told Interfax.

Responding to the blasts, local lawmakers wrote a letter to the governor demanding that ammunition disposal at the Donguz base be discontinued.

Citing complaints from residents and health officials, the lawmakers said locals were “anxious about another explosion,” Interfax reported.

Army personnel announced later in the day that they would detonate other munitions in a controlled blast at 6 p.m. Tuesday.

In an official statement, emergency workers told people to remain calm, saying they would feel the ground shake once again.

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