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Heaviest Snowfall in a Century Hits Moscow

By Roland Oliphant

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A Manezh lamppost bearing a single icicle Tuesday as a blanket of freshly fallen snow spreads off into the horizon. **Igor Tabakov**

The heaviest snowfall in a century brought Moscow and the surrounding region to a near standstill and left hundreds of people without power, officials said Tuesday.

And with snowfall set to continue at least until the end of the week, the authorities are bracing for more chaos on the roads.

"There hasn't been such a winter in 100 years," Pyotr Biryukov, deputy mayor for residential issues, said Tuesday in comments carried by Interfax. "The snow this year has already reached one and a half times the climatic norm," he said.

The capital has seen 216 centimeters of snow fall since the beginning of winter, Biryukov said.

Average snowfall in Moscow is 152 centimeters a year. Biryukov said the city saw 26

centimeters in the 24 hours preceding his Tuesday afternoon news conference and has seen 36 centimeters since the beginning of February.

The heavy snowfall that struck the city Monday quickly led to chaos on the roads. The Yandex Probki traffic monitoring service reached a full 10 points, and on Monday evening it issued the seldom-seen warning that "it's quicker to walk."

Moscow traffic police said Tuesday that they had counted more than 3,000 minor traffic accidents in the previous 24 hours, far exceeding the daily average for the city.

"There were 3,160 small traffic accidents in Moscow over the past day," a police spokesman said.

The average number of traffic accidents in the city is between 1,500 and 2,500 per day, he said.

Monday's unprecedented number of fender benders stems from traffic violations by drivers due to difficult conditions.

Snowfall is set to continue for the rest of the week but should slowly ease off, with forecasters predicting just 2 centimeters a day until Friday.

City Hall did not respond to requests for comment on its preparations for dealing with the snow, but Bityukov defended the city's handling of the situation.

He also denied that the city needs to hire more staff to clear snow.

"We have agreements with various contractors specifying when they should clear their area. If they don't, then we just don't pay them," he said in comments carried by Rossiskaya Gazeta.

"We all want everything cleared at once — roads, houses, your courtyard — but we have to choose what gets cleared first and what is cleared second," he said.

City workers cleared about 800,000 cubic meters of snow in the past day. It now takes three to four days to clear 7 centimeters of snowfall, a process that used to take a week in 2010, he said.

"Yesterday it snowed. Today we see the roads are clean," he said. "We can criticize, but traffic isn't stuck anywhere."

At the time he was speaking Tuesday afternoon, that was more or less true. Yandex Probki's traffic jam index had fallen to a less apocalyptic five points.

But that followed an extremely difficult night Monday, when there were estimated to be 3,500 kilometers of jams on the city's streets — roughly the distance between Moscow and Madrid.

Traffic experts said technical preparations were perfectly adequate, but they blamed at least some of the chaos on poor communications between City Hall and the public.

"In terms of technical preparation — the number and quality of staff and equipment devoted to clearing snow, and organization — we're really no worse than any other cold city in the world, be it Helsinki or Toronto," said Mikhail Blinkin, director of the Higher School

of Economics' Institute of Transport Economics and Transport Policy.

"What is significantly worse is that in those cities mayors will come out and appeal to citizens not to use their cars when there's a heavy snow forecast," he added. "I've seen it time and again there, but never here. This is a question of citizenship, not technical preparation."

And it's not just Moscow that's struggling to cope.

About 1,500 residents of the Ivanovsk region were left without electricity after heavy snowfall knocked out power lines and substations, the Emergency Situations Ministry said.

In all, 26 towns and villages were affected by the blackout, which occurred because power lines snapped under the weight of the snow.

Here, "744 homes, 3 schools and two kindergartens were in the zone of the blackout as of 9:45 a.m. Moscow time," the Ivanovo branch of the ministry said in statement.

By Tuesday afternoon, workers were still struggling to restore power in 10 municipal districts.

Police reported more than 100 car crashes in a day of snowfall in the Tula region, while authorities in Yaroslavl region reported several delays to school buses and long-distance coach services.

About 300 heavy trucks were caught overnight in a traffic jam on the A107 highway, also known as the Small Ring Road, near the Moscow region village of Shishkin Les, police said.

"Within a few hours [of the snow starting], there were about 200 trucks on Kievskoye Shosse and 100 on Varshavskoye Shosse," a police spokesman said Tuesday afternoon, Interfax reported.

The trucks were helpless in the heavy snow and ice, and traffic didn't start moving again until the area had been swamped with grit and sand, meaning many were stuck until 3 a.m.

Changing to winter tires is an annual ritual for many Russian motorists, but it is not compulsory, though the authorities are currently considering making it so.

Blinkin, though, said he doubted the efficacy of such a measure.

"It's nonsense. What, change the tires and all the traffic jams will go away?" he asked rhetorically.

Whether or not Blinkin is right about the tires, City Hall would be well-advised to give the massive snowfall some serious thought. Scientists say such extreme weather is only likely to increase.

"The weather we've seen in the past couple of days completely fits with the tendency that was identified a couple of years ago, that we are going to to see much stronger, intensive bursts of precipitation in the future," said Alexei Kokorin, director of the climate and energy program at WWF Russia. "In the summer, we will probably see stronger bursts of rain."

"In Moscow, that causes problems for transportation," he said. "But in Central Asia and other places, it means flash flooding

and very serious problems for agriculture."

Contact the author at r.oliphant@imedia.ru

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