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Meteor Strike Causes Panic, Injuries in Urals

By Alexander Winning

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A meteor with an explosive force of several kilotons crashed to Earth in the Chelyabinsk region on Friday, authorities said, causing a shockwave that shattered windows, shook the ground and injured close to a thousand people.

The unexpected meteor strike, which took place at roughly 9:20 a.m. local time, was seen in the Chelyabinsk, Sverdlovsk, Tyumen, Kurgan regions and the Bashkortostan republic, although the Chelyabinsk region was the worst affected.

By late evening, Chelyabinsk region Governor Mikhail Yurevich told journalists that 985 people were injured in his region alone and that 1 billion rubles ($33 million) of damage had been caused.

Yurevich said that 655 residents in the regional capital had appealed to medical services for help, including 159 children. Authorities in Chelyabinsk, a Urals city located around 1,500 kilometers east of Moscow, said that 31 residents were hospitalized locally.

President Vladimir Putin met with Emergency Situations Minister Vladimir Puchkov to discuss the fallout from the strike, ordering him to send a government commission to Chelyabinsk to analyze what happened and to assess the extent of the damage.

"We must above all think about how to help people. And not just think, we must act," Putin said, according to a transcript of the meeting on the Kremlin website.

Hinting at how the Emergency Situations Ministry could improve its response to such events, Putin said the meteor strike raised questions as to whether officials could be better prepared and inform citizens in a timely manner.

The ministry said it had fired an employee who fed reporters misleading information that emergency officials had sent text messages to Urals residents warning them about the meteor.

Puchkov flew to Chelyabinsk with the government commission late Friday.

The Russian Academy of Sciences said in a statement that the meteor had an explosive impact of several kilotons and broke up at an altitude of between 30 and 50 kilometers above the Earth.

By comparison, the atomic bomb detonated over Hiroshima during World War II had an explosive force of 15 kilotons, but it was detonated just 2,000 feet over the city.

Witnesses in Chelyabinsk told local media that they saw blinding flashes in the sky and heard deafening thunder claps. Photos posted online showed white, cloud-like traces hanging in the sky hours after the meteor strike, while Chelyabinsk inhabitants reported a lingering smell of burning debris.

Discussion of the meteor on social networks propelled the #RussianMeteor hashtag to the summit of Twitter's worldwide trends.

According to emergency officials, the damage was caused by a single meteor that burned in the Earth's atmosphere and burst into pieces, triggering a sonic boom.

After breaking up in the atmosphere, regional officials believe large fragments of the meteor fell in and around a lake 80 kilometers from Chelyabinsk. Three sites where meteor fragments could have landed were later found, and one fragment is believed to have landed in the lake itself.

The Life News tabloid published pictures of a large hole in the iced-over lake, into which divers are allegedly meant to plunge to study the meteorite.

Further debris is believed to have landed across the Chelyabinsk region, part of Russia's industrial heartland that is home to army bases, a nuclear power plant and several large metals factories.

Chelyabinsk Mayor Sergei Davidov said in a statement that almost 3,000 apartment buildings

were damaged by the shockwave from the meteor, along with 34 medical facilities. Emergency officials put the number of damaged buildings in the entire region at closer to 300.

A zinc factory in the city also suffered damage to its windows and walls, and destruction at Chelyabinsk's skating rink is estimated to have cost 200 million rubles.

Davidov identified reconnecting the city's heating supply as a priority and promised that hospitals and schools would be repaired over the weekend.

Temperatures in Chelyabinsk hovered around minus 5 degrees Celsius on Friday, and they were expected to drop to close to minus 20 degrees overnight.

All schools and kindergartens in the region were closed by order of the Federal Consumer Protection Service. Cell phone service and electricity and gas supplies were temporarily interrupted, and emergency officials advised Chelyabinsk residents to stock up on drinking water and foodstuffs and to stay away from broken windows.

In amateur video footage shot after the meteor fragmented in the atmosphere, panicked locals can be seen running through Chelyabinsk after a shockwave caused glass from windows to fly and car alarms were set off.

Some initially speculated that the incident was caused by fighter jets flying too close to the ground, while others feared that war had broken out.

City officials said they would compensate residents for all damage caused and urged them to stay calm, while regional officials said they had created a working group headed by Deputy Governor Igor Murog to deal with the meteor's after-effects.

Some Chelyabinsk residents took to smashing their own windows in the hope of claiming compensation, an unidentified police source told RIA-Novosti.

Emergency workers, police and medical staff are in a state of heightened alert across the Urals Federal District. The Emergency Situations Ministry said that more than 20,000 workers were deployed in the aftermath of the meteor strike and that it was monitoring radiation levels closely.

Reacting to the untoward celestial event, experts at the Russian Academy of Sciences estimated that the meteor measured several meters, weighed roughly 10 tons and traveled at a speed of between 15 and 20 kilometers per second.

"Objects of such a size fall to Earth fairly regularly, several times a year. Although they usually burn up at a high altitude," the academy said. "The object in question appears to have been extremely solid, likely consisting of iron," the statement said, adding that a comparable meteorite last landed in Russia in 2002.

Warning: The above video contains profanity

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