

Emergency Situations Minister Flies to Scene of Deadly Fire

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A television screen grab showing a firefighter battling the blaze at a psychiatric hospital in the Moscow region.

Cutting short a visit to Montenegro, Emergency Situations Minister Vladimir Puchkov flew to Moscow on Friday and took a helicopter to the Moscow region town of Ramensky, where 38 people died overnight in a fire at a psychiatric hospital.

Puchkov planned to hold an on-site meeting of officials in the town Friday evening, a ministry spokeswoman told journalists, according to Interfax. The possible cause of the deadly blaze was among the topics likely to be discussed.

Investigators and eyewitnesses raised concerns earlier in the day that road repairs and improperly equipped fire trucks might have contributed to the high death toll.

President Vladimir Putin ordered the Emergency Situations Ministry, Health and Social

Development Ministry and the Moscow region governor to conduct a thorough investigation into the tragedy, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

The fire might have left no survivors if it weren't for a nurse who saved two patients. Viktoria Volkova, 29, and the two patients she saved were the only people who survived the blaze in Ramensky, a town located about 120 kilometers north of Moscow, emergency officials said.

Volkova woke up around 2:20 a.m. to the loud clanging of the fire alarm, RIA-Novosti reported, citing the Emergency Situations Ministry. Seeing the blaze, she grabbed a fire extinguisher and tried to put it out.

But the flames quickly engulfed the one-story building.

Volkova then turned her attention to the two patients closest to her room and somehow managed to carry them out to safety.

Among the dead were 36 patients and two staff members, emergency officials said. While autopsies will need to be carried out, most appeared to have died of smoke inhalation in their sleep. The dead bodies were found in their beds.

The ages of the dead ranged from around 19 to 73, according to a list of names and birth dates released by the Emergency Situations Ministry.

Investigators were looking into what caused the fire why the incident claimed such a high number of lives.

In a troubling development, the Emergency Situations Ministry said it took firefighters an hour to reach the blaze after receiving an alert because the only road leading to the hospital was unpaved and part of it was closed for repairs.

Moreover, local resident Efim Volkov told Life News that the first two fire trucks arrived with no water in their tanks. Only the third was able to start fighting the blaze.

The fire was extinguished by 5 a.m., 2 1/2 hours after it broke out, the Emergency Situations Ministry said.

A short circuit or a carelessly handled cigarette are the primary suspected causes of the fire, although arson is also being considered, the Investigative Committee said in a [statement](#).

Preliminary findings suggested that some patients may not have been able to flee because they were under the influence of powerful medications, Interfax reported. The hospital's head doctor said the patients were in "a severe psychiatric condition" that in many cases were aggravated by alcohol and drug abuse.

At least some of the hospital's windows had bars, which could have prevented any patients or staff who woke up from escaping.

Fire safety inspectors visited the hospital to make sure it met safety standards twice last year, Interfax said. During the first visit they have found a few violations that were fixed before their follow-up visit in August, the report said.

Andrei Vorobyev, the acting governor of the Moscow region, has declared Saturday a day of mourning.

Health and Social Development Minister Veronika Skvortsova canceled a trip to the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria and planned to call a meeting later Friday to discuss fire-safety standards at the country's hospitals, Interfax said.

Deadly fires periodically break out in Russian institutions, where fire-safety regulations are often violated. Many hospital buildings are built of wood and lack proper fire exits. A 2009 blaze in a nursing home in the Komi republic killed 23 people.

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