The Moscow Times
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Raging Forest Fires in Siberia Kill 5, Destroy 100 Homes

April 12, 2015



A firefighter extinguishing a forest fire in Russia's republic of Khakasia.

A rash of forest fires broke out Sunday in rural southern Siberia, killing at least five people and injuring more than 70, the Interfax news agency reported.

The fires, apparently caused by the careless deliberate burning of dry agricultural land, have destroyed 100 homes across 16 communities in the Russian republic of Khakasia, the Federal Forestry Agency said on its website.

In a video link with Emergencies Minister Vladimir Puchkov broadcast on television, Viktor Zimin, head of the Khakassia Republic's government, said 78 people had also been taken to hospital during several days of fires raging through grasslands in dry and windy weather.

A primary school, other public infrastructure and private homes have been damaged or destroyed and some cattle have been killed, he said, adding that the initial cost of damages was at least five billion roubles ($96 million).

The controlled burning of fields is often done by farmers to promote crop growth, but abnormally dry weather in the region has contributed to the fires getting out of control.

The Emergency Situations Ministry said fires broke out in seven districts on Sunday. Forest fires have been reported in the region since late last month.

The ministry said Sunday evening that firefighters were managing to control the flames despite strong winds. The forestry agency said it was dispatching 40 firefighting aircraft to the region.

More than 50 people have been hospitalized because of the fires, and nine were in critical condition Sunday evening, the Interfax report said.

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