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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Pledges $100 Million in Aid to Fire-Ravaged Southern Siberia

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Family members walk away while passing the debris of destroyed buildings in the settlement of Shyra, damaged by recent wildfires, in Khakasia region, Apr. 13.

President Vladimir Putin said Thursday that the federal government would send at least 5 billion rubles ($100 million) to the southern Siberian republic of Khakasia, ravaged by wildfires in recent weeks.

"I talked with the governor today. ... About 2,400 homes need to be rebuilt. This will require money from the federal budget, about 5 or 6 billion rubles," Putin said during his annual call-in show, according to the Interfax news agency.

Dozens of people have died and about a thousand have sought medical attention because of the fires, linked to small agricultural brushfires that grew out of control amid abnormally dry conditions, according to local authorities.

On the same day, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Cabinet allocated almost 700 million rubles ($14 million) in aid to Khakasia.

About 80 percent of that aid is for assisting individuals whose properties burned down, the government said in an online statement.

Some 20 million rubles ($400,000) will go to compensating victims' families and covering funeral costs, the statement said.

But the government may need to consider sending aid to other areas as well.

Because of the fires, emergency situations have been declared in four Russian republics and regions in addition to Khakasia: Zabaikalsky, Buryatia and Krasnoyarsk in Siberia, as well as Amur in the Far East.

On Thursday morning, the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry said that 137 forest fires were burning across 152,000 hectares of land throughout the country, Interfax reported.

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