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Russian Firefighting Boss in Wildfire-Ravaged Region Arrested as Putin Visits

By Peter Spinella

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Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) meets with local residents and officials of the region at a temporary shelter for people affected by recent wildfires in Abakan, the Republic of Khakassia, April 21, 2015.

Shortly after President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that officials should be held responsible for damage caused by recent wildfires in a southern Siberian region, investigators said the head of a local fire department had been arrested for negligence.

Viktor Zenkov, a district firefighting head in the Khakasia region, "did not personally go to the area affected by the fires or arrange for people and their property to be saved," federal Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said in a statement, adding that the arrest was one of several being made.

The wildfires, believed to have originated as small-scale agricultural grass burning that grew out of control amid abnormally dry conditions, have killed at least 31 people and left about

5,000 people homeless in the region in recent weeks.

During a visit to the region on Tuesday, Putin told Governor Viktor Zimin that firefighting officials should be evaluated "for what they did and didn't do," state media reported. The president also told Zimin to promptly distribute aid payments to the victims of the fires and rebuild their homes.

The governor assured Putin that within the next three days the regional government will have paid 90 percent of those individuals entitled to compensation, state news agency TASS reported.

The governor said that 1,722 payments ranging in size from $200 to $2,000 have already been made. He added that the local administration was prepared to rebuild the victims' homes by the Sept. 1 deadline set by the president.

Putin said he would return to the region in about two months to check on the progress of the work, according to a statement on the regional administration's website. Last week during his annually televised call-in show, Putin promised $100 million in federal aid to the region.

Contact the author at p.spinella@imedia.ru

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