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Siberian Man Faces 10 Years in Prison for Setting Forest Fire

By Peter Spinella

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A firefighter works amidst the debris of a burnt building in Khakasia region, Apr. 13.

A Siberian man faces up to 10 years in prison for maliciously setting fire to forestland, police said Wednesday, as local regions struggle with the aftermath of a recent spate of wildfires that have killed 31 people and left thousands homeless.

The man, aged 51 or 52, according to the police statement, is suspected of deliberately starting a blaze Monday that burned more than three acres of land outside the city of Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky in the Zabaikalsky region in southern Siberia.

He was detained with the help of locals in the area, and when questioned by police he "could not explain his actions," the statement said. His name was not disclosed.

Emergency situations have been declared in Zabaikalsky and several other regions because of wildfires that broke out there last month.

Many of those fires are believed to have originated as small-scale agricultural grass burning that grew out of control amid abnormally dry conditions.

President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday visited the fire-ravaged region of Khakasia, also in southern Siberia, to speak with the governor and survey the damage.

Putin told the governor that officials should be held responsible if they could have done more to prevent the blazes.

Shortly after the meeting, the federal Investigative Committee said a local firefighting head had been arrested for negligence.

Viktor Zenkov "did not personally go to the area affected by the fires or arrange for people and their property to be saved," the committee's spokesman said, adding that several arrests were being made.

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