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Russia Buries Victims of Mall Blaze as Flags Fly at Half Mast

By Reuters

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Funerals began in Russia on Wednesday of the 64 people, most of them children, whose deaths in a blaze at a Siberian shopping mall have roused public anger over official corruption and incompetence.

Flags on government buildings across Russia flew at half mast, state TV and radio stations removed light entertainment shows from their schedules, and lawmakers in Moscow observed a minute of silence.

The fire at the Winter Cherry mall in the city of Kemerovo on Sunday killed 41 children. Investigators have not yet confirmed the cause of the fire, but the high death toll has been blamed on reported shortcomings in the mall's safety procedures.

At a funeral service in a Russian Orthodox church in Kemerovo, about 3,600 km (2,200 miles)

east of Moscow, women wailed as prayers were sung over three coffins, including two small caskets for children.

Sergei and Natalia Agarkov were burying two school-age children, Konstantin and Maria. The children's grandmother, Nadezhda Agarkova, was also killed.

Related article: Russians Demonstrate in Outpouring of Grief After Kemerovo Fire

All three had gone to watch a film at a cinema on the top floor of the shopping centre on Sunday, but had been unable to get out of the auditorium when the fire broke out. Russian media reported that the doors had been locked.

"This tragedy is made even worse by the fact that children became victims of the blaze. Great grief is upon all of us and there are no words that would express our common pain," the priest told the mourners, who held candles and repeatedly crossed themselves.

A day earlier President Vladimir Putin flew to Kemerovo and promised angry residents that those responsible for what he called criminal negligence would be punished and declared Wednesday a national day of mourning.

Anti-government protest

Investigators have said that the main theory they are looking into is that an electrical short circuit caused the fire. Another theory, which they say is less likely, is that the blaze began due to someone setting fire to something accidentally or deliberately.

Although authorities say they have recovered all of the bodies from the charred remains of the mall, many of the corpses were so badly damaged by the fire that they can only be identified via DNA testing. A further 14 people remain in hospital.

Related article: Two Days After the Kemerovo Mall Fire: Here's What We Know So Far

Russia has rigorous fire safety rules and a system of regular inspections, but enforcement is undermined by endemic corruption which affects many aspects of life in the country of 144 million people.

Moscow reduced the number of inspections for certain types of businesses after complaints that inspectors were extorting bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to violations.

But some business owners in Kemerovo said this meant that safety shortcomings were not being identified.

At least one vigil held in memory of the dead in cities across Russia has turned into an anti-government demonstration.

At a Moscow gathering on Tuesday attended by several thousand people, including opposition leader Alexei Navalny, protesters held banners reading "Bribes kill children" and "We demand a real investigation".

Some chanted "Putin - resign!", ten days after Putin secured a comfortable election win for another six-year term in office.

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