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Putin Orders to Beef Up Siberian Firefighting Teams

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Firefighters battle a fire in the village of Byas-Kyuyol in the republic of Sakha. **Semyon Ryabinin / TASS**

President Vladimir Putin has ordered reinforcements to battle the out-of-control wildfires currently raging across Russia's largest and coldest region, the Kremlin said Tuesday.

Authorities in the republic of Sakha (Yakutia) announced a state of emergency Sunday as the annual fires that have torn through the Siberian region's boreal forests reached human settlements, destroying dozens of homes and triggering mass evacuations. Officials blame climate change and an underfunded forest service on this year's unprecedented fires.

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"The Minister of Civil Defense, Emergencies and Disaster Relief Yevgeny Zinichev was instructed to increase the force for extinguishing fires in the republic," the Kremlin said.

More than 4,200 people and 655 pieces of equipment are currently estimated to be involved in

the firefighting efforts.

The Kremlin's statement said Putin also ordered regional authorities to draft proposals on additional support for victims.

The president's orders come amid calls from lawmakers for him to fire Natural Resources and Environment Minister Alexander Kozlov over a lack of funding for modern firefighting technology.

"We're extinguishing 1 million hectares with shovels!" said federal lawmaker Fedot Tumusov, who is a native of Sakha, one of Russia's most wildfire-prone regions.

"There are special powder shells used where it's impossible to reach the ground and where water is ineffective, as well as many other options for fighting the fires. But we have shovels," Tumusov complained.

Russia's weather monitoring agency Rosgidromet warned Monday that the situation in Sakha "continues to deteriorate" with weeks left to go in the wildfire season.

Meanwhile, satellite observations by NASA's Earth-monitoring tool MODIS showed that smoke from the wildfires reached the North Pole for what is believed to be the first time in known history last week.

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