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Heating Failures Hit Russia's Far East Amid Subzero Temperatures

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Thousands of people in the Far East city of Chita have been left without heating and hot water amid subzero winter temperatures following an accident at a local heating plant on Tuesday.

The leak at the Mashinostroitelny plant came as temperatures plunged to minus 20 degrees Celsius (minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit), the Chita.ru news website reported.

The Mashinostroitelny heating plant has been plagued by frequent breakdowns — the most recent occurring on Dec. 29 — and failed to obtain a winter-readiness certificate this year. In 2023, regional authorities noted that the plant's operations were hazardous and responsible for over 200 tons of harmful emissions.

Its owner, former Chita mayor and United Russia member Vladimir Zabelin, had promised residents that repairs would be carried out last winter. But in March 2024, he offered to sell the facility to the city administration for 107 million rubles ($1.2 million). The administration declined the offer, citing budget constraints.

Meanwhile, in the Far East republic of Sakha (Yakutia), residents of the Zhigansky district lost heating for six days amid temperatures of minus 50 C (minus 58 F) after a fire on New Year's Eve forced the shutdown of the district's central heating plant.

Temperatures inside some homes dropped to 5-7 C (minus 41-45 F), causing pipes and radiators to burst. Local shops quickly ran out of space heaters and blankets, the regional news outlet SakhaDay reported.

The Zhigansky district's heating plant is operated by a company headed by United Russia deputy Vitaly Chikachev.

Residents have called on Sakha's housing and public utilities minister to visit Zhigansk and declare a regional state of emergency. Local authorities in turn urged residents to stay calm amid the crisis and turned off the street lights to reduce the strain on the town's electrical grid.

"We need to think about how our power plant can handle this load. After all, people are turning on more than one [electric] heater [in their homes]. So the issue is very serious. If, God forbid, something happens to the diesel power plant, then there's no need for war, we'll all freeze to death anyway," Margarita Nifontova, an assistant to the State Counselor of Sakha, quoted a local resident as saying in an audio message.

Utility failures are a regular occurrence in Russia due to aging infrastructure.

In January 2024, thousands of residents across several regions endured days without heat, electricity or hot water amid freezing temperatures.

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