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Wildfires in Zabaikalsky Region Trigger Evacuations Near Capital City

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Wildfires that have been raging in Far East Russia's Zabaikalsky region since late last week forced residents near the regional capital Chita to flee their homes on Monday, while authorities shut down part of a federal highway.

Russia's Aerial Forest Protection Service said that a joint force of firefighters, government agencies and volunteers has been battling human-caused fires advancing toward the town of Atamanovka since Friday.

"It was definitely arson. There were three simultaneous epicenters," Viktor Mashukov, head of the Chitinsky district, said over the weekend. "Police are handling the investigation."

Atamanovka, home to fewer than 10,000 people, lies 18 kilometers (11 miles) from Chita. It is at least the second time in two months that fires have threatened the town.

On Monday, Mashukov said a dacha community, comprising around 50 households, was

completely destroyed in the wildfire.

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The Zabaikalsky regional branch of the Natural Resources Ministry said the blaze has so far scorched 350 hectares (865 acres), with a perimeter stretching 10 kilometers (6.2 miles).

Videos published by officials and local media showed flames and thick smoke tearing through the forest. Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry said 153 children were moved to safety from a nearby summer camp, with a second camp evacuated later on Monday.

Authorities temporarily closed sections of a federal highway connecting the region to the Chinese border.

The Zabaikalsky region currently accounts for 81% of all wildfire-affected land in Russia and has been under a federal-level state of emergency for the past two months.

Experts have blamed most of this year's wildfires on human activity, especially from the burning of dry grass near villages. A lack of snow cover and an early spring have also worsened conditions, they say.

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