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Investigators Blame Ukraine, Teenagers for Far East Forest Fires

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Russian Investigative Committee

Russia's Investigative Committee said Tuesday that Ukrainian operatives were behind the recent forest fires in the Zabaikalsky region, according to a statement on the agency's official Telegram channel.

The committee announced terrorism charges against two 16-year-old suspects, allegedly recruited through social media.

According to investigators, one suspect began communicating in June with an individual located in Ukraine who offered 80,000 rubles ($975) in exchange for setting the fires.

The teenager reportedly recruited a friend, and the pair purchased lighters before traveling to a woodland area near Atamanovka in the Chita district, where they ignited dry grass and pine needles.

The committee said that the suspects filmed their actions on a mobile phone and sent the

footage to their purported handler, although they never received the promised payment for their services.

The teenagers' arson allegedly triggered a massive wildfire that caused damage exceeding 300 million rubles ($3.65 million), according to official estimates.

Related article: Wildfires in Zabaikalsky Region Trigger Evacuations Near Capital City

The Chita District Court ordered both suspects detained on July 22, with one of the accused residing in an orphanage.

During the investigation, serious allegations of misconduct emerged: the mother of one defendant claimed her son was tortured during questioning.

Both teenagers admitted to starting the fires during interrogation and reportedly said they later participated in firefighting efforts by volunteering with emergency response teams, according to the state-run RIA Novosti news agency.

From January through July 14, Zabailkalsky region experienced 705 separate fires covering nearly 3 million hectares, according to the Emergency Situations Ministry.

Pavel Volzhin, acting natural resources minister for the region, reported that investigators have identified 104 individuals responsible for forest and landscape fires across the territory, with 42 of those suspects being minors.

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