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Wildfires Ravaging Swaths of Russia



James Hill for The New York Times

A thick, stinging smog enveloped central Moscow and many donned masks to escape its effects as the hot weather and the forest and peat fires outside the capital showed little sign of abating. [More Photos »](#)

By **ANDREW E. KRAMER** and KEVIN DREW
Published: August 6, 2010

MOSCOW — Wildfires that have overwhelmed [Russia's](#) firefighting services and burned freely through large areas of the heat-seared countryside have claimed 52 lives, clouded Moscow in smoke and on Friday forced the military to transfer rockets away from a garrison near the capital.

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More than 800 wildfires had been reported by the end of the week. Most were in western and central parts of the country, which is in its worst heat wave since record-keeping began here more than 130 years ago.

Temperatures have been spiking since mid-June, and no relief was in sight on Friday, when temperatures in Moscow were forecast to exceed 100 degrees, about 25 degrees higher than usual.

A thick, milky haze shrouded the city, and many Muscovites peered with red-rimmed eyes over the tops of surgical masks or wet handkerchiefs.

By 1:40 p.m., the city's environmental protection agency said the concentrations of carbon monoxide were five times as much as acceptable levels, while particulate pollution

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was three times as much.

The heavy smoke disrupted flights into Moscow. At Domodedovo Airport, visibility on the runways was down to about 400 yards on Friday, the news agency Itar-Tass reported. Dozens of arrivals were delayed or late, the airport [reported on its Web site](#).

Artillery rockets housed at the Alabinsk base, about 45 miles southwest of Moscow, were moved to safer ground away from the fires, a Defense Ministry spokesman told reporters.

The fires posed a different threat when they burned through forests toward a nuclear missile warning center outside Moscow; the center's fire brigades suppressed two fires Friday that had threatened the site, news agencies reported, citing a Russian Space Forces spokesman.

Russia's president, [Dmitri A. Medvedev](#), fired five military officers last week for allowing a fire to burn through hangars at an air force base near the capital, and he has upbraided governors and other lower-level officials.

On Friday, a presidential assistant, Georgy Poltavchenko, said in the state newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta that mayors would face a "debriefing" and that those found to have lagged in their response to the fires "will be brought to justice."

Local officials in Russia have faced accusations of taking inadequate measures to prevent fires and failing to respond effectively to the blazes. Last week, Prime Minister [Vladimir V. Putin](#) called for the resignations of local leaders who were not dealing with the crisis.

Earlier this week, material was moved from a nuclear research facility in Sarov in Nizhny Novgorod, about 310 miles east of Moscow, as fires approached, removing any threat of explosions at the center, said Sergei Kirienko, head of Russia's federal atomic energy agency, according to RIA Novosti news service.

Russia's emergencies minister said Thursday that nuclear contaminants from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster more than 20 years ago could be released into the atmosphere by the fires. "In the event of a fire there, radionuclides could rise together with combustion particles, resulting in a new pollution zone," the minister, Sergei K. Shoigu, said on state television.

Fires have left more than 3,000 people homeless, the government said Thursday. Mr. Medvedev has declared a state of emergency in 7 regions, and 28 other regions have declared an emergency for farmers whose crops are failing in a severe drought.

Officials were preparing a shelter in the country's Kaliningrad enclave between Poland and Lithuania to house 150 children from central Russia, the government said.

Andrew E. Kramer reported from Moscow, and Kevin Drew from Hong Kong.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 7, 2010, on page A4 of the New York edition.

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