

Moscow suffocates as wildfires continue burning

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Heavy smoke caused by burning wildfires continues to blanket Moscow, forcing the city's 11 million residents to don facemasks and cover windows with wet cloths in an effort to protect their lungs from the polluted air. The death rate in Russia's capital nearly doubled in July, reported Chief of the Moscow Health Department Andrei Seltsovskii on Monday, with the city's morgues close to full capacity.

"On normal days, between 360 and 380 die. Now it's around 700," explained Seltsovskii.

Russia's Ministry of Health and Social Development said that it was "puzzled" by the sharp increase in mortality. Refusing to confirm the data, the agency insisted that official statistics for July would only be available at the end of August.

Despite the refusal of top government officials to acknowledge the scale of the public health crisis in Moscow, city doctors have been reporting a spike in instances of heat stroke and smoke-related illnesses due to searing heat and unbreathable air.

On Monday, Alexander Frolov, the head of the state weather service, told Interfax news agency that the current heat wave is the worst in 1,000 years of recorded history. Temperatures, which have been as much as 20 to 25 degrees above normal for this time of year, are not expected to dip below 95 degrees Fahrenheit in Moscow until Thursday.

The elderly and those with heart and breathing conditions are the most vulnerable, although experts have stated that the extreme weather conditions have continued for such a prolonged period that even the healthy are now at risk.

Carbon monoxide and toxic gas levels in Moscow have been two to three times the level considered safe for humans for weeks on end. This past weekend, they reached an all-time record of almost seven times the maximum recommended limit. According to an August 5 report by Itar-Tass news agency, "Inhaling this air is tantamount to consuming two to three packs of cigarettes over several hours."

In an August 5 article published in the liberal *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, commentator Andrei Serenko notes

that in cities across central Russia affected by the heat and wildfires, "people who work in the sphere of burial services report, with black humor, about the incredibly 'productive summer' and the appearance of new graves at cemeteries."

A record 104,000 people departed Moscow by air on Sunday. However, for the vast majority of people, the acrid air is inescapable. Even the Moscow metro, one of the world's largest underground subway systems, is filled with smoke.

The city's vast working class and impoverished elderly population, who live without air-conditioning and have neither the financial means to leave nor anywhere to go, have been left to suffocate.

Earlier this week, the government announced the opening of 120 air-conditioned anti-smog centers. However, these facilities close their doors in the evening. Furthermore, no services are being provided to those most in need to get to them.

Over 550 wildfires continue to burn across central Russia, with dozens of cities reporting severe air pollution and numerous villages having burnt to the ground. In Ozersk in Russia's Ural Mountains, a nuclear processing facility that was the site of a nuclear disaster in 1957, is in danger of being engulfed in flames.

While the government reported extinguishing several hundred blazes over the weekend, hundreds more cropped up. Currently, 557 fires are burning over a total of 672 square miles. State authorities have acknowledged that the 10,000 firefighters involved in fighting the blazes, which thus far have killed 52 people and destroyed 2,000 homes, are nowhere near enough.

In the Moscow area, burning peat bogs are the cause of the suffocating smoke in the city. These swampy areas were drained during the Soviet era in order that the peat could be used as fuel and the land turned over to agriculture. Since the collapse of the USSR, however, the peat bogs have not been maintained and are no longer monitored for fire danger. Once peat ignites, it is difficult to extinguish because the substance smolders underground for long periods of time.

According to a group of Russian scientists who recently published a sharply critical assessment of the government's forest policy and its response to the wildfires, even flooding the area with water is not a guaranteed solution because as much as 25 percent of peat is bitumen coal. This substance absorbs water and continues burning.

The wildfires and the severe public health crisis they have created in Russia's capital are a direct product of government policy. In 2007, at the behest of then President Vladimir Putin acting on the behalf of powerful logging and manufacturing interests, a law was passed that disbanded Russia's 70,000-strong forestry service and semi-privatized the country's forestland.

Under the new forest code, responsibility for maintaining the forest—including fire protection—is transferred to private entities holding the land under lease. These companies, solely interested in making as much money as possible, do nothing to maintain forest roads, monitor fire danger, or provide resources in case a wildfire breaks out. While on paper the companies are subject to government oversight, in reality officials are bought off and look the other way.

Those forestlands not under lease are technically the responsibility of regional governments, which also do nothing to maintain and protect forestland.

As the present wildfire disaster has unfolded, there have been various news reports of firefighters encountering impassable fire roads, water supplies choked with weeds, and broken down emergency response vehicles.

During the Soviet period, there existed a developed system for monitoring forestlands and preventing wildfires that consisted of thousands of local observation stations manned by workers specially trained to identify fires and immediately alert authorities. The principle under which the system worked, which demanded enormous manpower given the enormity of Russia's forests, was that the sooner a fire could be identified, the smaller it would be and the greater the likelihood of containment.

Villages in Russia's hinterlands had firefighters and were equipped with fire engines and water supplies in case of an emergency.

All of this has been destroyed over the course of the past 20 years, as the public infrastructure and social services have been gutted. In village after village struck by the recent wildfires, residents report desperately trying to battle flames with garden hoses because no other resources exist. Many have died or lost their homes as a result.

Currently the Kremlin is engaged in a massive public relations campaign intended to cover up its own culpability for the death and destruction caused by the wildfires.

President Dmitri Medvedev has announced the firing of various government officials in order to shift the blame away

from the Kremlin and give the impression that the government is doing something. For his part, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has been touring the country, meeting with townspeople affected by the wildfires and promising compensation.

A great deal has been made of the fact that Putin issued a friendly reply to an expletive laden blog post by one Russian citizen that denounced the government's policies and pointed out the collapse in public fire protection since the Soviet era. After expressing supposed agreement with the commentator's criticism, Putin went on to blame the crisis on the drought, which according to him was unforeseeably bad. The prime minister's response was aimed at presenting himself as a partisan of "the common people" against the corrupt government bureaucracy, which he will now supposedly discipline.

This is all nonsense. The destruction of Russia's forestry service was overseen and implemented by Putin, whose primary concern is protecting the vast wealth of the country's big business and powerful state bureaucracy. At the time the 2007 forest code was passed, experts warned that the proposed changes would quickly lead to disaster.

More recently, Deputy Director of the Institute of Geography Arkadi Tishkov insisted in an interview with the Itar-Tass news agency that the present catastrophe could not be blamed on extreme weather.

"We are quite capable of coping with fires and preventing their emergence," he told *Itar-Tass*, noting that wildfires are a predictable feature of the forest environment. The scientist insisted, however, that it is "necessary to restore the forest service, forest fire protection, and government patronage of the forests."

The suffocation of Moscow and the destruction caused by Russia's wildfires is a direct product of the subordination of all aspects of social and economic life in that country to the profit motive. The dismantling of the Soviet Union opened up Russia's vast resources to exploitation by the most rapacious sections of a new Russian capitalist class, which have enriched themselves to unimaginable levels while overseeing the destruction of the public infrastructure and social services.



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