

Moscow wheezes as smog cloud blankets city

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A man takes a gulp of water to cool himself from 36 degree celsius heat, 97 fahrenheit, in Moscow on July 27. Inhabitants of Moscow gasped in a sizzling heatwave as the Russian capital saw record high temperatures and was blanketed in a heavy cloud of smog from forest and peat fires.

Muscovites Wednesday coughed their way through the hottest days of weather on record in the Russian capital as a smog cloud created by peat fires blanketed the city for a third day in a row.

The smog cloud -- which has left the spires of the Kremlin and onion domes of churches shrouded behind a misty curtain -- has been sparked by dozens of peat fires burning in the countryside around the city.

Irina Andrianova, spokeswoman for the emergencies ministry, said there were some 43 peat fires burning in the [Moscow](#) region and the authorities were hoping to extinguish most of them by the end of the day.

"But unfortunately, due to the [extreme weather conditions](#) they will appear again," she told reporters.

Alexei Popikov of Moscow ecology monitoring watchdog Mosekomonitring told the Interfax news agency that the concentration of harmful particles in the air in Moscow was three times higher than the norm and in some cases 10 times.

Russia's chief general doctor, Alexander Chuchalin, warned that the dangers of inhaling the toxic agents in the air was the same as smoking up to 40 cigarettes in a few hours.

"If we talk about about an equivalent in cigarettes, then this really is like smoking one-and-a-half or two packs of cigarettes in three or four hours," he said on state television.

"It's a high concentration. Under such concentrations, chronic illnesses can develop," he said, advising Muscovites to change their clothes daily and wear masks on the streets.

Gennady Onishchenko, the head of Russia's consumer protection agency, asked employers to allow workers to skip work while the Moscow authorities asked drivers to stay away from the city centre.

The emergencies ministry has employed an array of water-carrying aircraft to douse the fires, including two giant Ilyushin-76 planes, which have dropped a total of 516 tonnes of water.

The temperature on Monday hit 37.2 degrees Celsius (99 degrees Fahrenheit) beating Moscow's previous record temperature of 36.8 degrees from July 1920, the Moscow Weather Office said.

The weather Wednesday was almost as uncomfortable, with the

temperature nudging 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit).

The Russian capital and much of the country from the Baltic to the Pacific coasts have been sweltering in the severest heatwave for decades which has destroyed 20 percent of all of Russia's arable land.

The heatwave has also claimed hundreds of lives of people who drowned in an attempt to cool off from the record temperatures. The horrific toll has been blamed on drunkenness and the use of poorly equipped beaches.

Since the start of June, 170 people have drowned in Moscow alone, already almost three times higher than the toll of 65 for all of the 2009 season, Interfax reported, quoting medical sources.

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