

Moscow's toxic smog fails to shift as anger grows

August 9 2010, by Anna Smolchenko

The toxic smog smothering Moscow showed little sign of abating Monday as media accused officials of covering up the scale of the disaster and the authorities raced to put out a fire near a nuclear site.

Amid Russia's worst heatwave in decades, the raging [wildfires](#) and burning peat bogs in central Russia have choked Moscow for several days and even sent plumes of smoke as far as neighbouring Finland.

The acrid smog from the fires burning in the countryside dozens of kilometres (miles) outside the city is seeping into apartments, offices and even underground into the Moscow metro, forcing Russians to flee the city in droves.

Some 557 wildfires were still covering 174,000 hectares (430,000 acres) of land in Russia, only a slight improvement from the weekend, the emergency situations ministry said.

Media reports said well-off Muscovites were spending nights at air-conditioned hotels and accused authorities of covering up the true scale of the environmental disaster and smog-related deaths and illnesses.

"Authorities do not release statistics in order to conceal their incompetence," the Kommersant daily quoted an unidentified head of an enterprise in the funerals industry as saying.

"Morgues and crematoria are overcrowded."

There is no official data on the number of smog-related illnesses and deaths but a Moscow registry service official told AFP late last week the mortality rate in Moscow soared by 50 percent in July compared to the same period last year.

A doctor with a Moscow ambulance crew told Russia's top opposition daily Novaya Gazeta on condition of anonymity that the number of ambulance calls and deaths had gone up in recent days.

"We have been strictly forbidden to hospitalize people barring the most extreme cases," he said, complaining of hazardous working conditions.

"There are no air conditioners in vehicles and those that are simply do not work. Temperatures inside reach 50 degrees...Sometimes our doctors faint."

A surgeon at a major hospital described a similar picture, saying the smog and heat were taking its toll on both patients and medical staff.

"Air conditioners work only on the floor of the administration, temperatures reach 30 degrees in the operating room," he told Kommersant on conditions of anonymity. "It's hard to work in these conditions."

Many Muscovites laid the blame for the environmental catastrophe on the government which they say is not doing enough to shield them from the smog and heat.

Officials, meanwhile, say the weather would likely deteriorate later in the day but could improve later this week.

State air pollution monitoring service Mosekomonitring said carbon monoxide levels in the Moscow air were 2.2 times higher than

acceptable levels early Monday.

"We are currently seeing a strong smoke," spokeswoman Elena Lezina told AFP. "Pollution is currently growing."

Carbon monoxide levels had been 3.1 times worse on Sunday and 6.6 times worse on Saturday.

Weather forecasters say shifting winds are expected to help clear the air in the middle of the week, while the heatwave would continue for the next few days and subside by early next week.

Emergency situations minister Sergei Shoigu promised that peat bog fires around Moscow would be put out in a week.

"[Moscow](#), Muscovites, 11 million are so tired of this smoke, of this smog so we all need to join forces," he said in televised remarks.

Shoigu had told firefighters to redouble their efforts Sunday to put out a wildfire threatening one of the country's nuclear research facilities in Snezhinsk in the Urals region.

"You have only seven hectares left, that's not a big area and I hope you can put out that fire," said the minister.

The heatwave created a national catastrophe which has affected all areas of life, with 10 million hectares (25 million acres) of agricultural land destroyed and the government ordering a controversial ban on grain exports.

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