

# 77,500 Tons of Shells Blow Up in Fire at Urals Arms Depot

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An explosion lighting up the Friday night sky at a burning arms depot 20 kilometers from the city of Izhevsk. **Vadim Lazarev**

A fire, possibly sparked by a discarded cigarette, engulfed a Urals arms depot over the weekend, injuring at least 95 people and prompting 2,000 others to seek psychological help, officials said.

The military said no one was killed in the blaze, which started late Thursday and was extinguished late Saturday. But the top health official in the Udmurtia republic, Vladimir Muzlov, said two elderly people died of heart attacks, apparently from fright over the blasts.

Conscript Timur Miniakhmetov, who was involved in fighting the fire, was missing Sunday, Interfax reported. Thirty-seven people remained hospitalized with shrapnel and other injuries.

Firefighting robots, tanks, planes and helicopters were deployed to fight the blaze, and some 28,000 people were evacuated from villages bombarded by exploding shells, though most had returned home by Sunday.

The first explosion went off minutes before midnight Thursday at the facility located on the premises of a military unit near the village of Pugachyovo, 20 kilometers southwest of the regional capital, Izhevsk, the Emergency Situations Ministry [said](#).

The facility, used for the controlled destruction of old ammunition, housed some 150,000 tons of artillery shells, Interfax said. At least half of the shells were destroyed in the blaze, Udmurtia Governor Alexander Volkov said.

Rocket-propelled missiles also stored at the site were not affected, Deputy Defense Minister Dmitry Bulgakov told Itar-Tass. The missile could have inflicted damage at a greater range.

Flying shrapnel inflicted minor damage to houses in nearby villages, while trains were redirected to other routes and part of a federal highway was closed until Saturday. A stretch of the Transneft pipeline stopped receiving oil from producers, with losses amounting to 161,000 barrels per day, the company said Friday. It was not immediately clear Sunday whether supplies had resumed.

The authorities did not specify what had caused the fire, but an unidentified law enforcement official blamed it on a carelessly discarded cigarette stub, Interfax said. Governor Volkov faulted the "human factor" for the fire, but did not elaborate.

More than 1,200 people fought the fire, receiving welcome assistance in the form of heavy rainfall Saturday, a local Emergency Situations Ministry spokesman said.

Sales of alcohol in the vicinity of the depot were temporarily banned Sunday following reports of looters searching for booze in the abandoned area, Interfax reported.

Eight local residents were detained on suspicion of looting, seven of them accused of stealing alcohol from a shop and the eighth with carrying away household appliances from an abandoned house. Police said no large-scale looting took place.

Several evacuees tried earlier to get past cordons around the area to check on their homes, with the police having to shoot the tires of the car of one drunken resident Saturday, Interfax said.

Investigators were conducting a preliminary check into the explosions, the Investigative Committee said in a statement.

Although the damage to neighboring villages was minor, the cleanup of scattered artillery shells will take up to a year, Emergency Situations Ministry official Mikhail Vdovin said Sunday. He did not mention any compensation to villagers.

This is the second arms depot fire in as many weeks. Twelve people were injured in a blaze at an arms depot in Bashkortostan in late May. The fire, which destroyed 40 buildings, including 14 residential ones, was blamed on a soldier mishandling old ammunition.

President Dmitry Medvedev ordered Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov to identify officials responsible for the two incidents and threatened to dismiss or demote anyone found negligent of safety rules.

"We'll be stripping epaulets," Medvedev said.

Poor safety standards may be the result of serious staff cutbacks under an ongoing military reform, as well as insufficient financing, Sergei Melkov, a researcher with the Association of Military Political Analysts, said by telephone.

But arson should not be ruled out either, as similar incidents have taken place, said Igor Barinov, a former special operations officer who is now a State Duma deputy with United Russia. Ammo "destroyed" in such blazes in the 1990s and early 2000s sometimes popped up later in the hands of North Caucasus militants, he [told](#) the Nr2.ru news web site.

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