

Russia: School fires in Yakutiya and Dagestan kill 50 children

By Vladimir Volkov
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The end of spring break and commencement of the final term of the school year in Russia were tragically disfigured by two terrible fires that took the lives of 50 children, aged 5 to 18.

The first blaze occurred in Yakutiya on April 7. Twenty-two children died when a fire engulfed the wooden building of the middle school in the village of Sedy Bal. The aged building was constructed in the 1920s.

The fire began at 9:15 a.m. local time, when classes were in full swing. The blaze broke out on the first floor. It was caused by the generally poor condition of the electric grid, and in particular the disrepair of the power distribution panel located in the cloakroom next to the gymnasium. The fire spread rapidly through the two-story building and blocked all exits.

Children on the second floor tried to jump to safety. Only 12 survived, and all of these suffered burns or other injuries. Seven of these survivors were hospitalized and treated for broken limbs or serious trauma.

The other pupils, including all of those on the first floor, were burnt to death or died of suffocation. Among the 22 fatalities were 5 children from the fifth grade and 17 from higher grades.

According to an eyewitness report, some of those who died were inside the gym and were buried when the ceiling collapsed.

This village has no fire department. A fire brigade was called in from the town of Vilyuisk, more than 20 kilometers distant. The firemen arrived far too late. Despite the desperate efforts of the local inhabitants, the school building was totally gutted by the time the firefighters got to the scene. It took them four hours to completely extinguish the blaze.

Initial reports said the teacher, Sargalya Kapustina, died as well. However, it turned out that she survived, following a serious operation on her shin.

Kapustina explained that on the day of the tragedy she was conducting a class on the second floor. The fire began suddenly, and the entire building was quickly engulfed in smoke. Since the main staircase going down was cut off by fire and smoke, and there was no time to ascend to the attic and reach the fire ladder on the roof, she had to throw her fifth graders out the window. According to her account of the tragedy, most pupils died as a result of crowding on the staircase.

The teacher noted the heroism shown in this critical and fatal situation by the older students: seven students in the eleventh grade died because they tried to save the younger children in adjoining rooms.

Yakutiya is a Russian republic possessing great natural wealth. This huge but sparsely populated territory in northern Siberia possesses large reserves of gold, diamonds and non-ferrous metals. In the early 1990s President Boris Yeltsin granted the republic a great deal of autonomy. The Yakut corporation, Alrosa, a world leading diamond producer, is one of the largest companies in Russia. It takes in billions of dollars and both competes and cooperates with the South African diamond producer De Beers. Alrosa has luxurious offices in both Moscow and St. Petersburg.

All of this wealth bypasses the average citizens of Yakutiya, who live in abysmal poverty.

Huge floods swept through Yakutiya in the summer of 2001. Many towns were flooded, including the capital of the republic, Yakutsk. This event attracted the attention of the entire country and revealed the extensive decay of buildings and the urban infrastructure as a whole, particularly the dikes, which were swept aside by the floodwaters.

At the time, President Putin appointed a special investigation commission to look into the causes of that tragedy, and the government allocated a large sum of money for reconstruction. A significant portion of the funds was embezzled, and after the hue and cry died down everything returned to normal.

Only a few days after the fire in Yakutiya a similar incident took place in Dagestan. In the early morning hours of April 10 a fire in the boarding school for deaf and dumb children in the city of Makhachkala took the lives of 32 children under the age of 14. Another 119 persons (the school housed a total of 166 children) were taken to hospitals after suffering burns and broken limbs.

The fire in the boarding school started at 2:20 a.m. Strong winds shook the weakened walls of the building and caused a short circuit in the worn-out electrical circuitry, which resulted in a huge conflagration. The tragedy was compounded by the fact that the sleeping quarters were located on the second floor. The children could hear neither the noise of the fire nor, later, the warnings of arriving firemen. Many ran out of their

bedrooms and jumped from the windows. Others, frightened by the dark, tried to hide under their beds and suffocated.

The horrific state of vital infrastructure systems prevailing in Russia today, and the general atmosphere of disorder, organizational chaos and lack of preparedness, were vividly illustrated in the account of the 78-year-old guard of the boarding house, Rakhmatula Akhmetkhanov. He explained that it took 15 minutes to reach the firemen by telephone.

He said: “I dialed the emergency number three times, but nobody answered. Then I saw some kids outside the fence and shouted to them: for heaven’s sake, if you have a phone, call the firemen! Then I ran to help those who were being saved. Then, 10 minutes later, a policeman in a police car tried to use his radio telephone to reach the firemen. Finally a fire truck arrived, but it had no water. It turned out that they used up all their water putting out a fire in a church. Some of the firemen started to work at saving the kids, others took the truck to the closest water pump to fill it with water.”

The Makhachkala blaze was followed in short order by another blaze in Dagestan. Later the same week a fire broke out in the Hope orphanage in the town of Severobaikalsk, in Buriatiya. Fortunately, the two counselors at the orphanage proved to be very quick and resourceful. They called the firemen and safely evacuated all 13 children in the building. Nobody was hurt.

The central authorities reacted with thoroughgoing hypocrisy to these tragedies. They tried to shift the blame onto the local authorities. Education Minister Vladimir Fillipov declared that the main cause of the tragedies in Yakutiya and Makhachkala was “formalism in executing fire prevention measures.” In his words, “[T]he local authorities, as founders of these schools, must run them responsibly, and not excuse themselves by referring to the lack of funding or some other causes.”

The prime minister, Mikhail Kasianov, ordered an inspection of the safety systems in all schools, kindergartens and boarding houses, and noted that the fires in the Yakut school and the Dagestan boarding house “resemble a systemic problem.” He added that it was necessary “to understand what is happening.”

It is, however, obvious, that the main cause of these tragedies is the overall policy of the government—its methodical and systematic dismantling of the social structures developed during the Soviet period. Social programs continue to shrink and educational institutions, hospitals and libraries continue to lose even the miserly funds they had at their disposal in the past.

The tragic events at these schools have dealt a crushing blow to one of the major myths of official post-Soviet propaganda: that the young generation will benefit the most from capitalist reforms.

In reality, the young generation is the first and least protected victim of the social and economic decay that has developed as the inevitable result of the collapse of the Soviet Union—a process that has been accompanied by the takeover of the most

profitable industries and financial assets by groups of criminal businessmen, and the general subordination of the Russian economy to the dictates of the world capitalist market.

The new generation, those who still go to school or are just entering adult life, is inevitably suffering the brunt of the social devastation that takes on ever more frightening, dangerous and ominous forms. What can “adult life” offer them, beyond despair and poverty? Only a few individuals can hope to achieve a more or less respected place in society.

The Kremlin regime of aspiring capitalists continues to attack the remnants of social conditions developed prior to 1991. The same week that the school fires took place the finance minister published the government’s plans to “optimize” budgetary expenditures over the next few years.

This plan foresees, first and foremost, the shrinking of social programs. This year expenditures on education are to be cut by 782 million rubles, those for public health, physical culture and sports—by 53 million. Funds to prevent disasters and rebuild after they occur are also to be cut by 235 million rubles. In 2004 expenditures for education are slated to be cut an additional 3.7 billion rubles.

The government’s overriding concern is to secure greater profits for individual companies. It has fully funded the huge sums that go to pay external debts. (These expenditures now consume at least one half of the Russian budget.) As for the nation’s many millions of citizens, they are left to their own individual devices.

The deaths of 50 Russian pupils has forced the government to acknowledge the existence of “systemic problems” within society. But this is only a cowardly euphemism, designed to hinder the working out in public opinion of a more sober and clear understanding of the existing state of affairs. To call the situation in Russia and the other republics of the former Soviet Union by its true name one would have to speak of the bourgeois elites’ policy of planned and merciless savaging of their own people.

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