

Richard Balmforth, Reuters

European chill moves west and 122 die in Ukraine



Reuters © A weathervane in the shape of a witch on a broomstick is seen on the snow-covered roof of a house in London February 5, 2012. Heavy snow is forecast overnight across central and southern England, with a possibility that up to 15 cm could fall in the London area. Temperatures were also not expected to climb above -2 Celsius (28 degrees Fahrenheit), leading to icy conditions. REUTERS/Russell Boyce

Bitterly cold weather that has claimed hundreds of lives in eastern Europe swept westwards over the continent Saturday, blanketing Rome's Colosseum with snow for the first time in three decades and disrupting air and rail traffic.

Russian gas exporter Gazprom said it was unable to meet increased European demand as it battles its own deep freeze, and had reduced supplies "for a few days" before returning them to normal levels.

In Belgrade, soldiers were deployed to clear the central boulevard. Hundreds of unemployed responded to an offer of 1,600 dinars (10 euros) pay to join snow clearing efforts.

"I haven't worked for months and I have a family to feed," said Zoran Djidovac, a 30-year-old former metal worker. "The authorities said we'll be working for several days so this money will make a change for a while."

Near Moscow, a couple and seven of their children died in a blaze at their makeshift home overnight, apparently victims of a badly rigged-up stove which burned out of control. A nine-year-old girl was the sole survivor, Russian state TV said.

But in the capital tens of thousands took to demonstrated to demand fair elections in a march against Vladimir Putin's 12-year rule despite minus 17 Celsius (1 Fahrenheit) conditions, and supporters of the prime minister staged a similar sized rally.

To the west, hundreds of passengers spent the night at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport - one of the busiest in Europe - as their flights were delayed or cancelled.

London's Heathrow Airport warned it would operate a much reduced service Sunday with snow and freezing temperatures predicted to hit much of England over the weekend.

In Rome, snow blanketed ancient monuments for the first time in 27 years.

Power supplies were interrupted. About 160,000 people in central and southern Italy were without electricity. Power company Enel said 1,000 workmen were trying to fix damaged power lines.

The presidents of Croatia and Serbia who had attended a meeting with the Bosnian leadership Friday were holed up in the Jahorina mountains after being cut off by heavy snowfalls.

The cold spell touched North Africa too. Palm trees bowed under the weight of snow in Algiers after a freak snowfall of at least 10 cm (four inches) - the first there in eight years.

The ex-Soviet republic of Ukraine, where night temperatures have been as low as minus 33C (minus 27F) in the past eight days, registered the highest death toll as bodies continued to be found, some buried in snow in outlying parts of the country.

STATIONS BECOME SANCTUARIES

Metro stations in the capital, Kiev, have become sanctuaries of warmth for the homeless. Emergency authorities have set up hundreds of heated tents around the country to provide food, drink and shelter.

"I live in a social care home most of the time. But they throw you out of there at 8 in the morning," said Olexander, a homeless man, at a refuge in a Kiev park Saturday.

"It is good they have thought of putting these up," he said, nodding at the tent. "If we can just get through this frost, things will get easier."

The Emergencies Ministry said of the 122 people who have died over the past eight days from hypothermia and frostbite, 78 were found dead on the streets.

In neighboring Poland the story was similar with the dead mainly among the homeless. Several had been overcome by fumes from primitive stoves in poorly-ventilated premises. Others died by drinking too much and falling down, unnoticed, in the snow.

(Additional reporting by Sergei Karazy in Kiev, Rob Strybel in Warsaw, Vladimir Soldatkin in Moscow, Abdelaziz Boumzar in Algiers, John Irish in Paris, Aleksandar Vasovic in Belgrade, Petar Komnenic in Podgorica, Daria Sito-Sucic in Sarajevo, Martin Santa in Bratislava, Radu Marinas in Bucharest, Brian Rohan in Berlin and Steve Scherer in Rome; Writing by Richard Balmforth; Editing by Ben Harding)