Death Toll In Russian Plant Rises To 14, 60 Missing

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MOSCOW (AP) — Rescue workers found two bodies Wednesday in the destroyed engine room of Russia's largest hydroelectric plant, raising the accident's official death toll to 14, officials said.

Sixty other workers are missing and feared dead at the massive Sayano-Shushenskaya power station in southern Siberia after an explosion during repairs Monday blew out walls and caused the turbine room to flood. Three of the plant's 10 turbines were destroyed and three others were damaged, plant owner RusHydro said.

The giant power station has been idle since. Oleg Deripaska, the head of Rusal, the world's largest aluminum producer, visited the damaged power plant Wednesday to discuss with Russia's energy ministry and RusHydro how his factories will get power in the meantime.

More than 70 percent of all energy from the crippled hydroelectric plant goes to four Rusal smelters in Siberia, which are believed to be the company's most efficient plants.

Divers continued to scour the near-freezing waters that flooded the power plant for the missing workers but officials say there is little chance of finding anyone alive. About 1,000 rescue workers were involved in the search, Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

Energy Minister Sergei Shmatko described the accident as "the biggest and most mysterious in global hydroenergy" and said Wednesday it would cost 40 billion rubles ($1.2 billion) to rebuild the power plant's engine room.

The cause of the accident was still unclear. Officials and the plant's owner have cited a faulty turbine and a rise of pressure in the pipes as possible causes.

The accident caused power shortages in several towns and major factories, but by Wednesday the energy ministry said the power supply in Siberia was stable and "uninterrupted." Energy supplies from other power plants were being rerouted to cover the shortfall.

The accident also produced an oil slick that by Wednesday stretched over 60 miles (100 kilometers) down the Yenisei River.

The Sayano-Shushenskaya plant, located north of the Mongolian border, provides 10 percent of Siberia's energy needs and is a key energy supplier for Siberian

metallurgy.

The power plant's undamaged turbines could be switched on in a month and a half but the damaged turbines may take as much as two years to repair, RusHydro says.

Rusal said it was operating as usual with its smelters getting energy from other power plants but warned it may lose up to 500,000 metric tons of output due to the accident. Rusal spokeswoman Vera Kurochkina admitted that relying on reserve sources of energy was "just a temporary solution."

Deripaska, the Rusal chief, pledged to speed up construction of the Boguchanskaya hydroelectric plant, 500 miles (800 kilometers) northeast of the Sayano-Shushenskaya.

"RusHydro and we will do our best to speed up the commissioning of the Boguchanskaya plant which would help partially restore the energy balance in the region," he said.

The Boguchanskaya plant, co-owned by RusHydro and Rusal, is the largest hydroelectric project under construction in Russia. It began in 1980 but was mothballed in the 1990s. The first turbines are due to be switched on next year, but the plant is expected to reach full operating capacity in 2012.

Stocks of RusHydro dropped 9 percent Wednesday afternoon shortly after trading resumed following a two-day suspension.

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