

Cold snap in Eastern Europe kills more than 650

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A snow plough clears a road near Harrachov in the Krkonose Mountains (Giant Mountains), 130 kilometers (80 miles) northeast of Prague, Wednesday, Feb. 15, 2012. (AP Photo/CTK, Radek Petrasek) SLOVAKIA OUT

(AP) -- More than 650 people have died during a record-breaking cold snap in Eastern Europe, authorities said Wednesday, as officials in the Czech Republic blamed two massive car crashes on blinding snow.

Since the end of January, the region has been pummeled by the deep freeze, which has brought the heaviest blizzards in recent memory. Tens of thousands have been trapped in often-freezing homes and villages by walls of snow and unpassable roads, and officials have struggled to reach out to the vulnerable with emergency food airlifts.

Authorities in Russia and Ukraine alone reported Wednesday that more

than 300 people have died in the bitter cold.

About 100 damaged cars blocked a major highway in the Czech Republic connecting the capital, Prague, with the eastern part of the country and Slovakia. Seven people were injured in two separate accidents, authorities said, warning it could be hours before the mangled vehicles are cleared.

Some 40 cars crashed before midday Wednesday during a heavy snowstorm 188 miles (300 kilometers) east of Prague, injuring two people. Dozens of vehicles, including a bus, were involved in a separate crash southeast of Prague, which injured five, according to Czech public CT24 television.

Authorities in Russia said 205 people have died this year in the frigid cold, while Ukraine has had 112 cold fatalities and Poland had 107. Seven people have died in Romania in the past 24 hours, bringing the total there to 86 deaths. In Lithuania, there have been 23 deaths. Deaths were also reported in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and Slovenia.

In hard-hit Romania, some 23,000 people remain isolated in 225 eastern communities where more than one week of heavy snow has blocked roads and wreaked havoc on the rail network. Residents were worried that their houses could collapse under the heavy snow as authorities struggled to bring them food, water, medicine and wood.

A flight instructor flew his homemade powered parachute - a motorized vehicle that flies at low altitude - making several 45 minute-trips to deliver bread and canned food to people who have been cut off for days.

A five-month-old girl with severe pneumonia was taken to a hospital early Wednesday by sled and an army vehicle after authorities struggled

for six hours to reach her.

Romanian farmers - faced with up to 15 feet of snow in some areas this week - are concerned about their sheep, goats, horses and cows. One farmer said he dug his pigs out of the snow and brought them into his home.

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