

## 49 dead in Siberia after drinking toxic bath essence (Update)

December 19 2016

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A Russian city declared a state of emergency Monday after 49 people seeking cheap alcohol died after drinking bath essence containing methanol, a toxic substance used in anti-freeze.

The country's Investigative Committee, a powerful panel of inquiry, has launched a probe into the deaths in the Siberian city of Irkutsk caused by drinking the liquid, labelled as hawthorn-scented bath essence, and has detained several people.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the deaths a "tragedy" that required "very close attention."

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev ordered his cabinet to "sort out" the problem of selling such alcoholic products not intended for drinking—often labelled as cosmetics—to impoverished alcoholics.

Medvedev called their widespread sale through vending machines, which takes place in cities including Moscow, "an absolute disgrace".

Dozens of people were taken to hospital in the Siberian city of Irkutsk about 4,200 kilometres (2,600 miles) from Moscow after consuming the toxic substance, investigators said.

An employee of the local prosecutor's office Alexander Semyonov told Russian agencies that 57 people were known to have consumed the liquid, 49 of whom have died, while the others were in a serious

condition.

The official death toll grew by 20 people over the course of a few hours on Monday.

## **'State of emergency'**

Authorities were still searching places where the essence could have been ingested.

The product was sold for 40 rubles (65 US cents) for a 250 ml (8.5 fluid ounces) bottle.

The victims were between 35 and 50 years old, authorities said.

Irkutsk mayor Dmitry Berdnikov imposed a state of emergency in the city, pledging to "uncover and punish the perpetrators" and inform the public to prevent any further poisoning, the City Hall said on its website.

The city also halted sales of non-potable and uncertified alcohol products in the city, and municipal workers were going door to door and checking places where homeless people were known to gather, it said.

Police uncovered a workshop producing the hawthorn-scented liquid as well as various brands of counterfeit vodka on the outskirts of Irkutsk, detaining its two owners. Five people suspected of selling the substance were also detained.

Authorities said the product contained methanol and carried a label warning that it was unsuitable for consumption, but the mixture was nonetheless "consumed like alcohol".

Cheap perfumes and facial toners containing alcohol are sold without the

same trading restrictions imposed on alcoholic drinks.

Those who buy them to drink are usually the most socially disadvantaged.

Searches were being conducted at markets where the deadly product was being sold, investigators said, and a total of 500 litres (110 UK gallons, 132 US gallons) of the toxic liquid confiscated.

Homemade spirits and household products containing alcohol are popular throughout the former Soviet Union as a cheap alternative to standard brands, but are also blamed for a large number of alcohol-related deaths.

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Citation: 49 dead in Siberia after drinking toxic bath essence (Update) (2016, December 19) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-12-dead-siberia-essence.html>

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