

Russia's Kamchatka Volcanos have been Unusually Active since 2010

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Global Research, March 14, 2011

Rossiyskaya Gazeta 14 March 2011

Region: [Asia, Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

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Note: this article is from February 25, 2011.

If you want to know where the especially harsh winter weather came from, look no further than Russia – and prepare to pay more for your flour and coal this year.

Volcanoes on the country's eastern seaboard of Kamchatka have been unusually active for the last six months. The dust they threw up diverted winds in the Arctic, pushing cold air over Europe and North America and causing the unusually cold winter, say scientists.

This string of volcanoes, 29 of which are active, could cause more problems this year, depressing harvests around the globe just as food prices soar, and culminating in a second freezing winter.

The eruptions have come at the worst possible time. The Pacific Ocean has already been cooled by the “La Niña” ocean/atmosphere phenomenon, which is particularly severe this year. At the same time the Atlantic Ocean is warmer than usual.

Erste Bank said the combination of these factors means the weather forecast for the first quarter of 2011 is extreme, and will hit both the agricultural and mining sectors, sending spiking prices up even faster. “These climatic conditions reduce the outlooks of harvests for agricultural commodities and prevent the mining of commodities like coal. The extreme weather will probably culminate in the second quarter of 2011 . . . the prices of commodities will be influenced . . . then [we will see] an acceleration of consumer inflation.”

The combination shifts wind patterns around the world, but the spanner in the works has been the Kamchatka volcanoes, according to US climatologist Evelyn Browning-Garriss's acclaimed Browning Newsletter: “Kamchatka tends to be active but recently it has been ridiculous! Since late November, Kizimen, Sheveluch, Karymsky, and Kliuchevskoi have been erupting almost constantly.”

Volcanic ash screens out the sun, cooling the air below. This lowers air pressures, which changes wind patterns, especially in the Arctic. And, “the cold air normally trapped around the North Pole surges south”. The upshot has been some bizarre weather. The UK was colder than Russia on Christmas Day and New York was under heavy snow, while Moscow had icy rain as temperatures hovered around zero.

The snap has already impacted agriculture. Australia's wheat crop was down by 10pc in December – the worst fall in 100 years – and Russia's agriculture ministry is forecasting a mediocre harvest. Add in last season's severe drought in Argentina, floods in Brazil and

Venezuela, odd weather in agricultural parts of China, and food prices have soared.

What happens throughout the rest of this year will depend entirely on the volcanic activity, says Ms Browning-Garriss, which is impossible to predict.

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