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Russia sparks gas crisis as talks collapse

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IN MOSCOW

Severe shortages caused by its decision to cut the pipeline running through Ukraine meant a number of countries were forced to close down industry, schools and hospitals.

As millions of Eastern Europeans continued to endure freezing temperatures and emergency cuts to heating, Russian energy giant Gazprom ignored frantic EU pleas to turn on gas supplies after a two day stoppage.

Slovakia and Romania declared states of energy emergency and told the EU that if supplies were not back in place by tomorrow the situation would be deadly serious. Austria warned rationing would begin on Monday unless the taps were turned back on.

Intense talks between the EU, Gazprom and Naftogaz, Ukraine's gas operator, collapsed in Brussels after Russia imposed last minute demands.

The EU had proposed sending a team of independent inspectors to both countries to check the smooth flow of energy to Europe, a move that was necessary after Russia accused Ukraine of stealing gas meant for European consumers.

But Gazprom refused to



Gas storage and transit point in Boyarka, just outside Kiev in Ukraine

switch on pipelines unless it was given the right to send its own Russian inspectors into Ukraine in return for allowing EU monitors into Russia to check on the source of supplies.

Alexandr Vondra, the Czech Deputy Prime Minister whose country holds the EU's rotating presidency attacked "completely unacceptable blackmail" in a dispute that has now hit two thirds of the Union's members.

"We want supply returned immediately without any more blackmailing," he said.

Nicolas Sarkozy, the French President and German Chancellor Angela Merkel joined angry calls for Russia to resume supplies as gas shortages and heating rationing threatened to spread from Eastern to central Europe and beyond.

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