

Greece: Many killed in forest fires near Athens

Major wildfires on either side of Athens are raging out of control, with at least 74 people reported dead. People evacuated to beaches and into the sea, where coast guard boats struggled to rescue them.

At least 74 people have been killed and 170 injured as the deadliest wildfires in Greece in more than a decade swept through seaside areas near Athens.

Two major forest fires started burning out of control on both sides of Athens on Monday, with Rafina to the city's east, and the other at Kineta, to the west, being the hardest hit areas.

What we know so far:

- Many people attempting to escape the fires fled to nearby beaches to be evacuated by navy vessels, yachts and fishing boats.
- A number of people are believed to have died after having swum out to sea to avoid flames and smoke.
- The Red Cross reported finding 26 bodies huddled tightly together in the courtyard of a villa at the seaside resort.
- Four other fires were burning in other parts of the country, including near Corinth and on the island of Crete.
- Hundreds of firefighters are tackling the blazes.
- The fires had largely abated by Tuesday afternoon, but were not out.
- Hundreds of homes and cars have been destroyed.

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Eye-witness accounts: Residents described how the ferocity of the rapidly spreading fires caught them off-guard and sent them running toward the sea.

“I saw the fire move down the hill at around 6:00 pm and five or ten minutes later it was in my garden,” said 60-year old Athanasia Oktapodi, whose home is surrounded by pine trees. “They caught fire. I ran out like a crazy person, got to the beach and put my head in the water. Then the patrol boats came.”

Another resident of the impacted area described that “everything happened in seconds.”

“I grabbed a beach towel. It saved my life. I soaked it, grabbed my wife and we ran to the sea,” said local resident Andreaas Passios. “It was unbelievable. Gas canisters were exploding, burning pine cones were flying everywhere.”

Death toll expected to rise: Emergency officials said that the death toll is expected to rise as crews continue to check burned-out cars and gutted homes. “The problem is what is still hidden under the ashes,” said Vice President of Emergency Services Miltiadis Mylonas.

Help on the way: The Greek government invoked European Union civil protection agreements to seek international help from its EU peers. Germany, Italy, Cyprus, Croatia and Spain have offered to send firefighters, planes and equipment. Brussels is coordinating the volunteer aid response. European

Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker said the EU “will spare no effort to help Greece and the Greek people.”

Fires set intentionally? Authorities have not ruled out that fires were started by someone intentionally. Fifteen fires had started simultaneously in three areas around Athens on Monday. “I am really concerned by the parallel outbreak of these fires,” Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras said.



Three days of national mourning: Tsipras, who cut short a trip to Bosnia and returned to Athens, has declared three days of national mourning in memory of those who perished in the wildfires. “The country is going through an unspeakable tragedy,” he said in a televised address.

Why are there so many more fires? Science suggests that over the past several decades, forest fires have indeed increased. Large forest fires in the western US have been occurring nearly five times more frequently than in the 1970s and 80s.

Fires are a common problem in Greece during the heat of the summer when temperatures can reach 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), and can cause major loss of life. Wildfires that broke out on the southern island of Evia in 2007 claimed 77 lives.

According to the European Environment Agency, fire risk depends on many

factors, including climatic conditions, vegetation, forest management practices and other socio-economic factors.

The agency found that the annual area burnt in the Mediterranean region increased from 1980 to 2000 but has decreased since. In a warmer climate, more severe fire weather and, as a consequence, an expansion of the fire-prone area and longer fire seasons are projected across Europe. The impact of fire events is particularly strong in southern Europe.

Europe burning: The fires in Greece come as northern European countries also struggle with forest fires exacerbated by drought and unusually high summer temperatures. Sweden, Finland, Norway and Latvia are also fighting multiple blazes. Sweden's civil protection agency MSB said on Monday there were 27 active fires across the country, and temperatures were expected to soar as high as 35 degrees Celsius (95 Fahrenheit) this week. Other EU countries have sent assistance to Sweden.

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Source: <https://www.dw.com/en/greece-many-killed-in-forest-fires-near-athens/a-44798629>

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