

Greece: 76 dead in wildfires near Athens

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Catastrophic forest fires are raging in the Greek region of Attica near the capital Athens since Monday. According to current data, 76 people have died in the blaze so far, but the number of victims will probably increase. This is the biggest fire disaster since 2007, when devastating fires broke out throughout Greece and over 80 people died.

A state of emergency has been declared in the greater Athens area and the government has announced a three-day period of national mourning. More than 600 firefighters are on duty; the army supports them with airplanes, helicopters and ships. The government has also requested international assistance. Hospitals report almost 190 wounded, at least 11 of whom are in severe danger.

The fires had started in two different places at the same time: one in a pine forest near Kineta, about 50 kilometres west of Athens, and another in a forest in Penteli northeast of the city. Due to the constant drought and heat with temperatures around 40 degrees Centigrade (104 degrees Fahrenheit) and due to strong winds up to wind force 9, the flames spread at high speed, especially in eastern Attica, and advanced toward the sea coast. Many Athenians own holiday homes in this region and are currently staying there for vacation.

Infernal scenes took place around the port city of Rafina. The popular seaside resort of Mati, where most of the victims lived, burnt out completely in a very short time. Pictures of charred house ruins and burnt-out cars remind one of a war zone. The fire quickly caught the houses, so that many inhabitants—whole families—had no time to flee. A reporter from the news channel Skai reported that more and more charred bodies are being discovered, including two women clutching their dead children.

Many tried to escape in their cars, but were trapped on the way by flames and ran in all directions to save

their lives. Especially tragic is the fate of a group of 26 people who tried to save themselves in a field but were surrounded by fire and all burned. The rescue workers found the bodies crowded together, including families.

Others fled to the coast, but not all reached one of the beaches. Many arrived at rocks by the sea where they had to wait for rescue. A teenager jumped in panic from the cliff and was found dead in the sea.

Greek survivor Kostas Laganos described his escape at the BBC: “Fortunately the sea lay before us and we jumped in, as the flames followed us to the water. We suffered burns on our backs before we could dive into the water.”

More than 700 people were rescued from the coasts by fishing boats and ships. The media showed children, elderly, men and women wading through the water surrounded by thick, stuffy smoke or waiting on wooden chairs, in the background, clouds of smoke that were visible as far as Athens, where they laid a dark veil over the sun.

At present, over 1,000 buildings, including homes and shops, and at least 300 cars have been destroyed. Hundreds of people had to leave their belongings behind and are now without shelter. While emergency care and accommodation by the authorities were initiated slowly, the solidarity of the population was great. Many offered shelter, donated blood and helped with food. Numerous people from the larger area and several children’s camps had to be evacuated.

The rescue and firefighting work was hindered by the strong and turning winds, and also by the overnight darkness from Monday to Tuesday. But the fact that the catastrophe is taking on such dramatic proportions cannot only be seen as a result of the weather conditions, but has social causes.

Although Greece faces huge forest fires every year and is well aware of the dangers of the summer heat, it is not prepared for them. According to the *Financial*

Times, even hours after it was clear that the fire would reach Mati, no official evacuation order was issued. A journalist from the state broadcaster ERT, who was there with his family at the time of the fire, described the lack of infrastructure and preparations for such disasters.

The main road of Mati, Leoforos Marathonas, became a trap for many people because it is too narrow and does not offer enough space for the passage of rescue vehicles. The numerous alleys and dead ends also made it difficult to get through. An emergency plan either did not exist or was not known to the inhabitants, so that they looked in panic for ways out and were trapped. Information to those affected via radio or other channels was also inadequate. The rapid power failure was accelerated by the fact that the electricity pylons in the villages were made of wood and burnt down.

The exact causes of the fire disaster are still unclear at this time, but there are several facts that point to arson. Serafim Tsiougris, president of the Panhellenic Union of Voluntary Fire Brigades, told ERT: “I can say without any reservations: this is not an accidental event. When a great fire breaks out in Kineta and simultaneous reports of fires at several Attica sites, that is very disturbing.” Media and officials also stressed that the fact that the blazes started in completely different places at the same time suggests arson. The government has already ordered an investigation.

Forest fires in Greece are often started by criminal land speculators in order to create new building land. Their goal is to illegally build real estate on the burned forest areas, which they subsequently have approved by the authorities. They use “flexible” laws and exploit the fact that Greece is the only European country without a forest registry. Due to the high property prices, they are targeting coastal regions and the Athens area in particular. One Mati resident said to FT that already “many summer homes were built illegally among the pine woods,” increasing the risk of fire.

When in 2007 a fire inferno spread all over Greece, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained how the ruling elite, then under the government of right-wing conservative New Democracy, and criminal real estate speculators were responsible for the forest fires.

More than 10 years later, the situation has not improved—on the contrary. The government of the pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) has

imposed cuts on the fire brigade and pushed through massive austerity in the public sector. The social attacks on the Greek working class on the one hand and the privatisation and deregulation of the state in the interests of companies and oligarchs on the other have brought class tensions in Greece to a boiling point.

Resistance is growing among the population. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reports under the headline, “After the flames comes rage,” many local residents denounced the government’s lack of reaction. For example, there was no extinguishing water in the area of Mati. A Greek pensioner commented: “This is the job of the administration and Nea Makri has a mayor who prefers to appear on television rather than do his job as a local politician”. Another inhabitant said she was “angry” that the state did not react properly to the fire catastrophe.



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