

Record temperatures spread wildfires in Greece and southern Europe

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Wildfires have again taken hold this summer in Greece, Italy, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria and other south-eastern European countries.

Nearly 10,000 hectares (approx. 40 square miles) of mostly forest land was burnt in northeastern Attica in a fire that erupted on August 11 in the village of Varnavas, 30km north-east of the Greek capital Athens.

Aided by gale force winds and high temperatures approaching 40 degrees Celsius, a wall of flames over 25 metres high and covering a 30km radius spread south and reached Athens' northern suburbs of Nea Penteli, Patima Halandriou and Vrilissia—just 14km away from the centre of Athens.

This is the first time since 1981 that a fire has reached an urban area in the outskirts of the capital. The sky of Attica was covered with black smoke with the Hellenic Thoracic Society advising those suffering with lung and heart problems to avoid going outside.

The blaze was the second largest the Attica region has experienced since 2009, when just over 13,000 hectares of forest land were burnt. Last year Greece saw the biggest fire in the European Union since 2000 when around 90,000 hectares were burnt in the Evros region of northern Greece near the land border with Turkey, resulting in the death of 18 refugees.

Due to this week's fires, thousands were evacuated including patients and staff from a children hospital and a military hospital, both near Mount Penteli. The body of a 65-year-old worker was discovered in the bathroom of a burnt out factory in Patima Halandriou, where she was seeking shelter. She had been employed at the factory for 20 years.

The blaze raged for more than 40 hours with firefighters still putting out remnants of the fire three days later. It led to extensive power cuts, after at least 120 power poles were damaged.

The increasing frequency of fires in Greece are the

result of climate change, which has led to record high temperatures, with June and July this year the hottest since records began. Temperatures approaching and even above 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) are becoming the norm during the summer in large parts of Europe.

This is part of a wider trend across the continent, which is sweltering under a heatwave with fires also breaking out in Italy's Latina Province and in the north of Portugal. Record temperatures in Spain prompted the government to declare a drought emergency with water restrictions imposed on the island of Tenerife. The Mediterranean is especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change, which according to the United Nations Environment Programme is heating up 20 percent faster than the global average.

In July, wildfires ripped through Albania, beginning in the south of the country and travelling north. Further fires broke out in recent weeks in Albania, Bulgaria and Sardinia. At the end of July, an elderly man in North Macedonia was killed in a forest fire burning since early July.

Research by the Barcelona-based Institute for Global Health found there were more than 47,000 heat related deaths across Europe because of high temperatures last year, the warmest year on record globally and the second warmest in Europe. Greece had the worst heat related mortality rate in Europe, with 393 deaths per million compared with the European average of 88.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said: "We constantly have to become better. And from any mistakes and any fire that gets out of control we always we always have to see what we can learn and what we can do better."

The reality is that the conservative New Democracy (ND) government has learned nothing since it came to power in 2019. In the last eight years 13 major fires have burnt more than 45,000 hectares of forest land within

Attica, 37 percent of the region's total.

Scientists have raised concerns about the long-term effects on the health of Attica's inhabitants—nearly 40 percent of Greece's total population. With only 0.96 sq. metres of green space per inhabitant, Athens already has one of the worst ratios of green spaces per capita in the world—well below the minimum of 9 square metres per capita recommended by the World Health Organisation.

In April, Climate Crisis and Civil Protection Minister Vassilis Kikilias announced a 2.1 billion programme to combat natural disasters caused by climate change with a view to upgrade its crumbling fire service fleet of planes, helicopters and fires engines. None of this will be available in the next two years.

Between 2020 and 2010, €1.1 billion was cut from forest protection and forest fire service due to successive austerity packages imposed at the behest of the European Union and International Monetary Fund. The trend has continued. The national park in Mount Parnitha north of Athens only has seven rangers to cover an area of 35,000 hectares of forest land. Speaking to *Documento* in April Forestry and Environmental Scientist Eleftherios Stamatopoulos said: "If we invested in the management of forests with the 145 million euros that [fire fighting] Air Tractors cost we could have covered the needs of forests for twenty years."

Greece's fire service is understaffed by 4,000, while fire-fighters have an average age of 47 and most fire engines are more than 20 years old. Fire-fighters are routinely shipped all over the country to fight blazes. Speaking to *Documento* last month the president of the Panhellenic Union of Temporary Firefighters recounted his recent experience of being shipped from Thessaloniki in Northern Greece to fight a fire in Keratea in Southern Attica: "They sent personnel from Thessaloniki with five vehicles and 20 of us crammed in a small space. We got to Keratea and I was dropped off in an area where I knew none of the roads. We arrived at 4pm after an eight-hour road-trip in a 25-year-old vehicle with no air conditioning".

Greece's population is often left to their own devices to fight fires that break out. On the Mega Channel, Dimitris Megagiannis, a livestock farmer in Penteli, said following the recent fire in Attica: "Nothing's left of my farm. There have been many fires here since 1995 and we have put all of them out with a fire engine that was always here. Today we are at the mercy of God: Not one firefighting plane or fire engine. It was just me with my son and two buckets of water the whole time. Until I

couldn't take any more at some point and I passed out and don't know what happened afterwards. When I came to after 10-15 minutes I heard my animals bleating and dying."

Financial support offered to those affected by fires is risible. Owners of burnt homes are offered between €5,000-10,000 and small businesses between €2,000-4,000.

In a tweet with the hashtag #EUSolidarity, Janez Lenarčič, European Commissioner for Crisis Management, boasted of the EU's in fact minimal assistance to Greece which consisted of "2 planes from the rescEU fleet from Italy, one rescEU helicopter from France and ground firefighting teams from Romania and Czechia."

Cuts to the fire service are an EU-wide phenomenon, despite the increase of wildfires across the continent due to climate change. According to Eurostat, 10 countries cut firefighting jobs between 2021 and 2022, with the largest drops recorded in France, Romania, Portugal, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Belgium. France cut its firefighters by 5,400, while Romania and Portugal slashed their firefighters by 4,250 and 2,907 respectively.

The pseudo-left Syriza, now Greece's official opposition, has tried to make political capital of the Attica fires. In a statement the party denounced "the audacity and irresponsibility of Mr Mitsotakis, which is unprecedented."

But having governed the country between 2015 and 2019 Syriza bears as much responsibility as ND for the devastations wrought by forest fires in Greece over the last years. After betraying its massive popular mandate to end austerity in the summer of 2015, the Syriza government signed a third austerity package from the EU, IMF and European Central Bank. This imposed even deeper spending cuts, decimating the living standards of millions. Syriza, which presented itself as a fervent defender of the environment, presided over the forest fire in the summer of 2018 at Mati, a small coastal town outside Athens, in which over 100 lost their lives.



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