

European heat wave leads to deaths and forest fires

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Much of Southern and Eastern Europe is still suffering from a heat wave that has killed dozens of people. Temperatures have reached as high as 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit) in Italy and parts of the Balkans. Average summer temperatures for the Balkans normally range from about 30 to 35 degrees Celsius (86 to 95 Fahrenheit).

Forest fires raging throughout the Balkan region have taken their worst toll in Croatia, where fire fighters have been forced to leave huge areas burning because of landmines left over from the Bosnian war. Around 100 hectares (250 acres) of forest have been destroyed near the Adriatic town of Sibenik and three other fires are reported in southern Croatia. Forest and bush fires are also spreading through Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania.

In Croatia alone, officials fear that the heat may be responsible for many more deaths than initially thought. Some 40 people died of heart attacks caused by the heat in the country's four major cities. Hundreds more were hospitalised with serious health problems.

The heat wave represents a social disaster in a region that has endured eight years of civil war with all its consequent damage to public services and infrastructure. The entire region is presently engulfed in thick smog, which, together with the destruction of forests, will have a lasting and damaging impact upon the environment and agricultural production. Experts have predicted that some crop yields will fall by as much as 70 percent due to the temperatures.

Much of the Kosovo province has been without electricity for the past few days after one of only two main generating units was shut down, partly because of the drying up of a river that supplied water.

In Romania nine people were confirmed dead from the heat last week. Most were farmers working in the

fields in temperatures as high as 43 C (109.4 F). Eight people have died in Bulgaria and the government has closed roads and prohibited heavy lorries from travelling between noon and seven at night due to melting tarmac. Rail tracks have also buckled in the sun's heat, disrupting train services. A state of emergency has been declared in the south-east of the country as a fire swept through rural areas across an estimated 100 kilometre (63 mile) wide front. Officials say 500 hectares of wheat fields and 5,000 hectares of forest have been destroyed.

Medical sources say the heat wave claimed 15 lives in Turkey in the first four days. If fatalities caused indirectly by the heat, such as heart attacks, are included the death toll has reached more than 100.

The Greek island of Samos was consumed in flames as hundreds of specially drafted fire fighters and local volunteers battled to save it from ruin. Shops, homes and farmland are all being wiped out and fires have been burning on all sides of the airport used by tourists. A state of emergency is in place in both Samos and central parts of Greece. The government has authorised the local council in Samos to hire extra aircraft and helicopters capable of carrying water to be dumped on the fires from above.

Government spokesman Dimitris Reppas described the worst conditions for combating forest fires the country had seen in decades. He blamed a dry winter, which had made much of the country into tinderbox, strong winds and the record heat wave. Reppas also suggested that property developers who set illegal fires to clear land may also be to blame.

A number of villages have been evacuated and one woman in her 90s was burned alive in her home where she had stayed despite warnings to leave. This latest death is in addition to the four people confirmed dead

in Greece as a result of the heat wave.

In the capital Athens pollution levels are dangerously high, and smog has been made even worse by a toy factory fire on Thursday, which unleashed thick black smoke from burning plastic into the air. The Greek government had already activated its Xenocrates emergency plan requiring all state buildings to provide air conditioned spaces to the public several weeks ago. Public beaches have also stayed open late into the night to provide a way for people to cool off. Hospitals are on full alert with all leave having been cancelled for ambulance drivers.

Problems could intensify in Greece this week as garbage collectors threaten to proceed with their strike, despite a government order for civil mobilisation. The prospect of rotting garbage on the city streets will pose a serious health risk under conditions of the excessive heat.

Meteorologists say the heat wave is due to masses of hot air coming from the Sahara Desert and moving north into the region. Most say there will be no letup in the temperatures until the middle of this week at the earliest.



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