

Firestorm wreaks havoc in Australia's capital city

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Four people were killed, hundreds injured and 530 homes destroyed when bushfires engulfed the southern and western suburbs of Canberra, Australia's national capital, last Saturday afternoon. Shops, a high school, health centre, water treatment plant, fire station, RSPCA animal hospital and the Mount Stromlo Observatory were among the facilities incinerated.

The disaster, the worst-ever to affect the city of 320,000 people, has left thousands homeless and many without electricity, telephone, gas, water and sewerage services. Over 2,500 people were evacuated from their homes, with 300 treated for burns and smoke inhalation and 60 hospitalised. On Sunday, local authorities called on residents to reduce their use of showers and baths and minimise their use of toilets in an effort to prevent raw sewage being released into the Molonglo River.

Protracted drought, high temperatures and low humidity created the conditions for the fires, which began on January 8 in the Brindabella Ranges and the Namadgi National Park, 35 and 50 kilometres respectively from Canberra. Fanned by strong winds, the blazes gradually gathered momentum and began moving toward the city.

By Friday they were within 12 kilometres of the suburbs. As the wind intensified and rapidly changed direction on Saturday, the fires expanded into a broad, unpredictable front that threw hot embers and other burning debris up to 10 kilometres ahead.

Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Emergency Services firefighters heroically attempted to contain the fires but were completely overwhelmed and by noon Saturday the inferno had broken through containment lines, raced across grasslands in the south and west of the city.

One blaze, with flames shooting 60 metres into the air, consumed pine forest plantations near Mount Stromlo and then moved into the western suburbs of Duffy, Chapman and Holder. Another swept out of the Brindabella Ranges toward Belconnen in the northwest of the city. Other suburbs were hit as embers carried by the high winds set off spot fires.

Thick smoke grounded the fleet of 14 firefighting helicopters for most of the day, leaving Canberra's grossly under-resourced fire service, which has only 12 fire tankers and approximately 500 officers, to fight a desperate rearguard action. The fire service failed to reach most of the burning

suburbs.

Residents, many of whom were given no official warning of the approaching disaster, attempted to save their own homes with garden houses and water buckets. But these efforts were hampered by failed water pressure, exploding gas meters, arcing power lines and other serious hazards.

In Duffy, 236 homes were burnt down and three people died—Alison Tener, a 37-year-old mother of three, Doug Fraser 60, and Peter Brooke, 73. The neighbouring suburb of Chapman lost 75 homes and in Kambah, a southern suburb, 39 houses were destroyed. Some homes were reduced to rubble in less than 10 minutes. The next day, streets in these areas resembled war-zones littered with the smoldering remains of homes, twisted and burnt power poles, fallen power lines and abandoned, burnt-out cars.

The Mount Stromlo Observatory, one of the oldest in Australia and an internationally renowned facility, was gutted within minutes. Five valuable telescopes, a laser centre, workshops, new equipment and priceless manuscripts and books were destroyed. One of the worst losses was the highly specialised \$2.5 million Near Infrared Integral Field Spectrograph, the only one in the world. The two-tonne machine, which scientists had been working on for three years, was soon to be transported to the Gemini North telescope in Hawaii.

The ACT government was immediately criticised by residents, as well as planning and firefighting experts, for its grossly inadequate response to the emergency, under-resourced firefighting facilities and the lack of serious prevention measures.

ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope denounced the criticism, claiming it was tantamount to slandering the firefighters and emergency workers. He declared this was a "once-in-a-generation" firestorm, which the government "simply did not and could not possibly have had the capacity to foresee or deal with."

Australian Governor-General Peter Hollingworth backed Stanhope and Prime Minister Howard warned Canberra residents not to "lapse into an orgy of blame". Hollingworth told the media: "You could never have enough fire engines and could never have enough equipment to deal with what has

happened.”

But the catastrophe was entirely predictable. It was a direct result of inadequate fire prevention planning, insufficient firefighting resources, the location of residential areas next to pine plantations and dense bushland, and the failure of ACT emergency services to act on early predictions issued by the Bureau of Meteorology.

The Bureau of Meteorology warned authorities on January 15 that a disaster was looming. Two days later, it said high winds and over 37-degree Centigrade (98.6 Fahrenheit) temperatures posed a serious threat to the city. These warnings, however, were not taken seriously. Last Friday, residents were told they should not be “unduly concerned” and at noon on Saturday, just before the fire charged out of the surrounding hills, Canberra fire authorities said the threat to suburban homes was “slim”.

Two hours later, at 2.05pm, the Emergency Services Bureau called on residents to return to their homes and begin taking defensive precautions. Forty minutes later, a State of Emergency was declared and within another hour and a half, houses in Duffy were aflame.

Firefighters have bluntly criticised the ACT authorities for its lack of preparation and planning. An unnamed senior NSW fire officer told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “They [the ACT] were in a state of denial. Blind Freddy could have seen what was about to happen.”

According to some reports, offers of equipment and manpower from the NSW Rural Fire Service were not taken up until it was too late. Peter Holding, a NSW volunteer firefighter told ABC radio that he led a convoy of five tankers full of water to Canberra on Saturday afternoon, only to be left unused by the emergency centre management.

Some government officials have attempted to blame environmentalists and national park authorities, accusing them of restricting precautionary burnoffs and the logging of national forests, but federal and territory governments have wilfully ignored high level reports over the last decade or more on the dangers confronting the city.

Consecutive ACT governments failed to act on a special 1994 report, which identified “specific problem areas” where “ill-prepared residences” abutted native and pine forests with “poor access and inadequate fuel reduction zones”. Written by fire expert Howard McBeth, the *Fire Hazard Reduction Practices of the ACT Government* report made 40 recommendations to “reduce the impact of the type of disaster that *will* occur in the ACT resulting in the loss of life and significant property damage”.

Australasian Fire Authorities Council executive director Len Foster told the media this week that the Howard government’s refusal last year to support a \$16 million request for new firefighting equipment as part of an integrated national strategy, had contributed to the catastrophe. The AFAC request included additional helicopters and planes.

A coronial inquiry will be held into the fire deaths and the ACT government has said it will investigate the emergency services response to the disaster. The Howard government has also indicated that it may investigate the catastrophe. But firefighting unions have greeted these promises with skepticism.

The United Firefighters Union (UFU), which covers 11,500 professional firefighters in Australia, has called for a Senate inquiry. UFU national secretary Peter Marshall said: “The question needs to be answered as to whether such community resources are being utilised to their full potential in times of crisis.”

While the coronial inquiry and other investigations may reveal some of the major factors that produced the Canberra firestorm, they are not likely to touch on the essential cause of the disaster—the dominance of the profit system over the safety and lives of the city’s residents.

Factors such as lack of fire safety planning and the criminally inadequate provision of only 12 fire tankers—which could only fight six house fires at one time—for a city of 320,000 people are not acts of nature, but the product of political decisions by governments that place the budgetary bottom line above human life.

This has been further underlined by the contemptuous amount of government assistance offered to those hit by the disaster. While more than 500 family homes have been lost, with estimates that at least a quarter have no insurance and half have no contents coverage, the ACT government has contributed just \$5,000 to families that lost homes and an additional \$5,000 for the uninsured.

Prime Minister Howard toured the fire-damaged areas the day after the firestorm, declaring his concern for those affected. But his government has only contributed \$500,000 to the Canberra bushfire recovery appeal, hardly enough to rebuild a few houses, let alone have any impact on the myriad of problems now facing thousands of city residents.

Three days after this “donation”, Howard announced that he was dispatching Australian troops, ships and airplanes to join the impending US-led military offensive against Iraq. The cash and resources expended on this act of aggression would be more than adequate to repair the basic infrastructure and housing damaged or destroyed by the Canberra fires.



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