

Thousands die in European heat wave

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Record-high temperatures across Europe—causing heat-related deaths and leading to a series of deadly forest fires in Southern Europe—have claimed thousands of lives. The French health ministry has now reported that up to 3,000 have died in recent weeks in France as a result of the heat wave, after previously claiming there was no accurate way to measure heat-related deaths.

Doctors in France have struggled to cope with the increased number of heat stroke victims. Temperatures topped 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) in Paris in recent days, easing slightly on Thursday. French funeral parlours have noted a 37 percent increase in deaths over the past week compared to last year.

Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin has come under increased criticism for failure to act quickly to deal with the catastrophe. The government launched an emergency plan in the Paris region this week to deal with the medical crisis, allowing for the call-up of doctors from holiday and providing extra staff and temporary mortuaries. The French Red Cross is helping care for victims and military hospital beds have been provided as wards have experienced extreme overcrowding.

Patrick Pelloux, president of the association of French accident and emergency doctors, indicated that a mixture of official complacency and budget cutbacks had exacerbated the problem. Speaking earlier this week he said: “The weakest are dropping like flies.” He went on to accuse the government of complacency with regard to the deaths, commenting, “They dare to say these deaths are natural. I absolutely do not agree. No statistics are being gathered. There is no general information, nothing.”

Paris doctor Muriel Chaillet told the BBC, “Last summer the situation was catastrophic and this year it is worse. We were not at all prepared—the hospital system is failing.”

Earlier this week in Great Britain, temperatures rose to over 37.7 degrees Celsius (100 degrees Fahrenheit) for the first time in recorded history and temperatures soared to near-record highs across the continent. Doctors in northern Italy have reported at least 60 heat-related deaths and an estimated 25 have perished in forest fires in Portugal.

In contrast to the US, the overwhelming majority of

European homes and workplaces lack any sort of air conditioning to counter the heat. Millions of workers have been required to carry out their duties in tropical temperatures and doctors throughout Europe have reported a huge increase in heat-related complaints, particularly of elderly people and the already infirm.

Forest fires have brought havoc to a number of southern European countries. Major fires have been raging in central Portugal since the end of July. At the start of this week, 20 main fires and hundreds of smaller ones were being fought by firemen. So far the fires have claimed an estimated 25 victims while foresters estimate that up to 215,000 hectares of land have been lost. One Portuguese paper wrote that “the centre of Portugal is going up in flames.”

The struggle to put out the fires in the country’s heartland has been hampered by the outbreak of new fires over the past few days in the Algarve region adjoining the Portuguese coast. Soldiers have rescued dozens of local inhabitants from fires raging in the region of Silves and Alzejur. Tourism has been badly affected with train and road travel hit and thousands of holiday makers fleeing the area. The Portuguese prime minister has declared a state of emergency and appealed to the European Union for assistance.

Forest fires have also led to a state of emergency in regions of Spain where the fires claimed their first victims this week. The burnt bodies of five members of the same family were found apparently trying to flee their home, which was surrounded by flames in northeastern Catalonia. Five hundred residents have been taken into safe custody. Since the beginning of the month, nearly 30,000 hectares of forest have succumbed to the flames. At least one firefighter has lost his life in the Spanish fires, with emergency teams stretched to capacity.

Thousands of acres of forest have also been lost to fires raging in Italy, where at least 60 heat-related deaths have been reported. Firefighters battled 24 fires with the worst in the regions of Tuscany, Piedmont, Liguria, Lazio and Campania. In Italy and Portugal media reports have blamed speculators and criminal interests intent on property redevelopment for starting some of the blazes.

Fires have also hit Croatia, some parts of Germany and the

French Mediterranean island of Corsica. France already suffered some of its worst ever fires this summer with large areas of the southern coast hit in July. Coastal resorts around Cannes were also badly affected.

Throughout Europe, and particularly in Germany, excessively high temperatures have also led to river warming. Fish stocks in rivers have been massively depleted and the growth of dangerous algae threatens a number of north German beach resorts. In all of these regions, the devastation caused by the fires will have major long-term repercussions for farming, tourism and the environment as a whole, with entire swathes of forest falling victim to the flames. Already before the fires of last week farmers in many parts of Europe were complaining that many weeks without rain and desiccated fields would lead to a record loss of harvests, particularly wheat.

The sweltering temperatures also have far-reaching consequences for energy provision. The French and German governments are holding emergency meetings this week to discuss ways of averting power cuts caused by the heat wave. Dropping water levels have lessened production at nuclear power plants throughout the continent. France's 58 nuclear power stations, for example, which provide 70 percent of its electricity, use river water as an essential part of their cooling process and are expected to be allowed to break the rules on the maximum temperature of water they can recycle. Temperatures are expected to drop towards the end of this week, but only then will the full extent of the human costs of the heat wave become clear.

The heat wave has reignited debate over whether the high temperatures represent a normal fluctuation in the climate or are a symptom of global warming, with the overwhelming body of current evidence indicating the latter is the case. The year 1998 was the warmest ever recorded and the 1990s the hottest decade of the millennium. Experts anticipate 2003 will easily overtake 1998 as the hottest year so far. In addition, seven of the ten hottest summers recorded in Germany since the 1860s have occurred in the last 13 years.

In a paper released last month the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) declared: "The increase in temperature in the 20th century is likely to have been the largest in any century during the past 1,000 years" while "the trend since 1976 is roughly three times that for the whole period." According to the WMO, climate change is not only responsible for record temperatures in Europe and India but also for the frequency of tornadoes in the United States and the severity of floods in Sri Lanka and other countries.

This latest heat-related crisis exposes the inadequacy of the measures undertaken by world governments to counter global warming. Although its data has long since been rendered out of date, the international Kyoto agreement still

has to come into effect. Russia has declined to accept the conditions of the agreement and America, by far the world's biggest polluter, unilaterally pulled out of the agreement with the administration of George W. Bush.

European politicians have reacted to the latest weather-based catastrophes with a mixture of public consternation and narrow pragmatism, although this is by no means the first time in recent history that the continent has been hit by such disasters. In the summer of 2001 a broad stretch of Mediterranean Europe was hit by the worst fires for decades and in 1997 large areas of Poland and Eastern Germany was hit by severe flooding. Then in August of last year large parts of central Europe were once again hit by record rainfall.

The floods were the severest in living memory. Broad bands of Eastern Europe, the Czech Republic, including its capital Prague, and regions of southern and central Germany slipped under water and were plunged into chaos. At that time politicians wrung their hands, but it emerged that authorities in Poland and Germany had drawn no lessons from the disaster of 1997 and were unprepared for the devastation of 2002.

Now the same short-sightedness and lack of preparation is evident in the reaction by European governments to the latest heat wave and forest fires. Despite some measures undertaken by the European Union since the fires of 2001, including increased satellite tracking of weather patterns, there was no adequate warning (not to speak of preventative measures) of the heat wave and its consequences .

In addition, emergency provisions to combat the consequences of the current heat wave have been jeopardised in many European countries by government measures to privatise and cut back on firefighters, forestry provision and protection, emergency and medical services.



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