

Portuguese government criticised for failure to tackle forest fires

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On September 29, the head of Portugal's firefighting and civil protection service was forced to resign after continued criticism of the devastation suffered by large areas of Portugal due to summer forest fires that continued into late September. Joaquim Leal Martins is the first official to go as a result of the crisis, but its significance extends far deeper and will have serious implications for the Social Democratic Party government.

Leal Martins, who was a Naval engineer by training, had no experience in firefighting or civil protection and was given the post only last April. A close associate of Prime Minister Durao Barroso, the appointment caused a lot of controversy at the time. Martins' nomination was strongly contested by the two main Portuguese firefighters organisations, which argued that the 59-year-old did not have the right experience to head the National Firefighting and Civil Protection Service. With both associations boycotting the swearing in ceremony on April 2, the appointment was seen as demeaning the important role of the fire civil protection service.

His appointment places the spotlight on Barroso and his misuse of ministerial posts, which was further highlighted by allegations by a Portuguese television company that local officials from the town of Lamego used a water-dropping helicopter for pleasures trips while a helicopter was hired to fight the fires.

The government already faced popular opposition over its siding with the US and Britain in the war against Iraq and its handling of the economy, which has seen huge attacks on public services to keep the economy within the limits set by the Euro zone.

The wildfires that swept through the heart of the Portuguese countryside during July, August and September killed 20 people including two firefighters.

Many more suffered serious injuries. The total area destroyed has been estimated at a record 417,000 hectares of eucalyptus forests, orchards, vineyards and scrubland, according to the United Nation agency the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). This is equivalent to an area the size of Luxembourg, or just over half the size of the US state of Connecticut. The fires of 2002 destroyed 102,706 hectares and the previous record was in 1991, when 182,000 hectares were destroyed.

Before the most recent fires the government estimated the cost at nearly 1.4 billion euros in damages due to wildfires. The Forestry Department based in Lisbon recently confirmed that 377,650 hectares of land had been destroyed up until early September, while an estimated additional 32,500 hectares has been ruined over the last weeks. The estimate includes 20,000 hectares of pastures, according to preliminary estimates, with hundreds of homes burnt down, coupled with hundreds of telephone poles and over 2,000 kilometres (1,200 miles) of power lines and 2,400 transformer posts completely destroyed.

Some of the most stunning areas of natural beauty around the southern Algarve region of Serra De Monchique and the difficult to reach central districts of Guarda saw hundreds of firefighters at times trying in vain to control the blaze. Many national parks were completely levelled and consumed by the fires, including the Serra Da Estrela National Park, which was hit by fires only last year.

Firefighters, with the help of state troops, were working 24 hours in back-to-back shift changes with more than 3,000 firefighters placed on standby or used in other areas throughout Portugal. The firefighters were working in temperatures above 45 degrees Celsius during the months of July and August and in September

temperatures still reached 40 degree Celsius (104 Fahrenheit). In the Amareleja area 47.9 degrees was recorded, much higher than average for Portugal, as a result of the severe heat wave that swept throughout Europe.

In Portugal forest fires or wildfires are a seasonal problem, with calls made every year for more resources and tools to equip firefighters to control the problem. This year's intense heat coupled with strong winds has seen fires spread at an astonishing pace.

The cause of the blazes has been put down to arson. Police recently announced the detention of a man suspected of starting five recent forest blazes near Lisbon, bringing the total number held on arson charges since August to 90. The national press has been pushing stories about arsonist and pyromaniacs and the need to instil harsher penalties. Barroso met with the chief of the judiciary to "bolster measures against arsonists".

To simply declare the fires a criminal problem is an all-too convenient diversion from the failure at government level to tackle the crisis. The National Association of Professional Firefighters has issued a statement critical of the government and the civil defence authorities. At their national meeting held in Lisbon on September 10, chairman Fernando Curto stated that the government suffered from "dis-coordination and disorganisation" of authorities in reacting to the fires. He questioned the activation of district emergency plans, but not the National Emergency plan to coordinate the limited resources most efficiently. "There was dis-coordination, logistical disorganisation, failure in communication, and lack of equipment and adequate vehicles for firefighters," Curto told a local news agency. He added that the country's firefighting forces should be reorganised and demanded that a permanent intervention team be set up in each of the more than 300 municipalities.

The leader of the opposition Socialist Party, Eduardo Ferro Rodrigues, stated that the government had "dis-invested" in wildfire prevention and botched firefighting operations through "dis-coordination" and "excessive centralisation" and called for a parliamentary inquiry.

These criticism were highlighted by Portugal's reliance on overseas assistance to help fight the infernos. Spain, France and Britain sent manpower and

much needed equipment, while Canada supplied essential aircraft to dump large amounts of water on strategic areas. Portugal also received financial aid from Switzerland to the tune of 1.5 million euros.

Portugal was criticised by the European Regional Affairs Commissioner, Michael Barnier, who after an air tour of the devastation said, "I have seen many catastrophes in my time as regional affairs commissioner and this was one of the most serious." He later stressed that in the future Portugal must "contain and diminish the ultimate damage caused by natural disasters," saying that "repairing always costs more than prevention."

He went on to state that it was of paramount importance that Portugal now invests in national and regional programmes to make fire prevention a priority. Barnier said failure to do so would undoubtedly cause Brussels to look very carefully at any future requests from Portugal for disaster aid. Barnier's tour was part of a deal to give the Portuguese government disaster aid of 31.65 million euros in grants from the European Union's Solidarity Fund, set up to help member states cope with national disasters.

The financial costing of the disaster does not include consideration of the flooding which is predicted as the first rains will wash away the topsoil due to the destruction of the forests that would normally absorb the rain water. Heavy rainfall is expected in October and November, with many locals already preparing for the worst without government assistance.



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