

Over 60 die as forest fires sweep Greece

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Inferno, apocalypse and “hell on earth” are some of the terms which have been used to describe the devastating forest fires which have been raging in Greece since last Friday, and which have so far claimed at least 63 victims, including children.

Hundreds of persons have been taken to hospitals suffering from burns and smoke poisoning. The fires are the region’s worst in decades. A state of emergency and a three-day-long state mourning period for the victims were proclaimed last Saturday.

In addition to the mainland, in the region around the capital Athens, the Peloponnese peninsula and the largest Greek island, Euboea, have been hit. Dozens of villages are surrounded by flames; 15 have already been completely evacuated.

Most victims died trying to protect their houses and property from the flames. Others died trying to escape from villages encircled by fire. The village of Artemida in the west of Peloponnese was most badly hit. Here the fire claimed 30 lives.

On Sunday, the fire disrupted the country’s most important railway connection, between Athens and the port of Thessaloniki. Only a huge effort by the fire brigade and fire-fighting airplanes prevented the flames from spreading to the historical town of Olympia—home of the Olympic Games. Nevertheless, the flames damaged an excavation area in the proximity.

The full extent of the destruction is not known, since the fires are still raging out of control. On Monday morning, a spokesman for the fire brigade announced that almost 90 new fires had broken out in the last 24 hours.

The fires have devastated ten thousand hectares of forest and agricultural land, and many hundreds of houses have burned down or been made uninhabitable. So far, around 3,000 persons have been left homeless, and the impact on agriculture is serious. Many small farmers face ruin following the devastation of their properties, land or livestock.

Greek television has run reports all day of desperate individuals trying to beat back the flames with buckets of water, garden hoses or torn off branches. Increasingly,

despair and mourning are combined with anger at the inadequacy of the response by the authorities. The forces sent to fight the fire by the Greek authorities are evidently overwhelmed by the extent of the blazes.

Approximately 9,000 fire fighters, 1,000 soldiers and 1,800 fire engines have been deployed. Most of the 20 fire-fighting airplanes had to be borrowed from other countries, since Greece only has a handful of antiquated machines at its disposal. Over and over again, the inhabitants of the affected villages have deplored the late, insufficient or utterly inadequate assistance of the authorities.

Some smaller villages burned down completely before any assistance in the form of fire engines or spray planes arrived. Only after the fires had been raging for 24 hours did the Greek government ask for international assistance.

The comments by conservative Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis of Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy, ND), who referred at the weekend to a “national tragedy,” and social democratic opposition leader Georgios Papandreou, who spoke of “scenes of Biblical destruction,” cannot hide the responsibility in this tragedy of Greece’s leading political parties.

Karamanlis claimed that climate change—the Mediterranean region has undergone one of its hottest summers in recent years—and arsonists were responsible for the fires. While it is no doubt the case that these two factors played an important role, they do not explain the lack of preparedness on the part of the government.

The handling of the forest fires throws a sharp light on the irresponsibility and nepotism which for decades have characterized the policies of the country’s two biggest parties—the ND and the social-democratic Pan Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK).

In the spring of 2004, Karamanlis’s ND was able to win parliamentary elections following the rejection of PASOK by voters. PASOK had governed the country over the previous ten years and, in common with all other European social-democratic parties, had implemented a right-wing, neo-liberal policy aimed at promoting the interests of European big business.

Under the PASOK government, funds for public

institutions and infrastructure were ruthlessly cut at the behest of the European Union bureaucracy in Brussels, in order to meet the criteria for the introduction of the euro. Despite promises to the contrary, Karamanlis has continued and even intensified this policy. Facing opposition protests at home, the Greek government was praised by the European Union for its stringent budgetary policy. Now the consequences of this policy are coming to light.

On Sunday, a longstanding letter of complaint from the fire brigade of Sparta to the responsible ministry in Athens was made public. The letter pointed out the complete inadequacy of fire brigade staff and made clear that for financial reasons, no new staff had been hired for years. In addition, vehicles and equipment were in a deplorable condition. Most vehicles are older than 15 years, barely functional, and in need of constant repair.

In order to quash demands for increased funding for public safety, the government removed the entire top layer of management of the fire brigade last year. Experienced officials were replaced by Karamanlis supporters on the basis of party membership. Some of the replacements lacked any appropriate background or qualifications.

Another example of government negligence is the issue of garbage disposal. The country has at least 400 public dumping grounds. With summer temperatures often in excess of 40 degrees Celsius, these waste dumps catch fire on a regular basis. Although European Union authorities have requested on several occasions that the government eliminate such dumps, Athens has stubbornly refused to invest in waste incineration plants.

The role of arson in the forest fires is also bound up with political considerations.

The Greek government and a private television station have offered rewards of up to a million euros for the apprehension of arsonists. So far, three men and a woman have been arrested by police on suspicion of causing fires through negligence.

But it is already clear that the majority of the fires were deliberately started. In Athens, an incendiary compound was discovered that was used to start one of the fires, and it is known that most fires began at night.

Property speculators are thought to be behind many of the fires. Forest areas are ignited, upon which properties are subsequently illegally erected and then officially registered by corrupt local authorities. This method is well known and, according to estimates, is the cause of dozens of fires every year.

The Greek Federation of Architects estimates that some 100,000 properties have been erected in Greece on such illegally acquired developmental land. The majority the constructions are mansions, and it is now presumed that

foreign speculators are also participating in such real estate practices, employing impoverished youth or local petty criminals to ignite the fires.

Such a state of affairs is possible only because of widespread corruption in the country and a legal situation which encourages such criminal enterprises. Greek governments of every political stripe have in recent years created a large grey area with regard to ownership rights, enabling companies and businessmen access to favorable building land in exchange for high bribes.

The country lacks any uniform planning code or registry of forest and land. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, many municipalities are still dependent on thoroughly antiquated maps dating back in some cases to the Ottoman Empire. The newspaper quotes Mayor Konstantin Ioannidis, who describes the practices of speculators: "And when you have an eye on a piece of land in the region of Attika, you simply state it is located in neighboring Gerotsakouli."

The Karamanlis government had planned a change to the constitution at the beginning of the summer to permit the enclosure of land previously regarded as woodland.

In light of this situation, Karamanlis's call in a speech on Saturday for the Greek people to make "sacrifices" and demonstrate "readiness to assume responsibility" resonates in the ears of the fire victims as utterly hypocritical.

Despite growing popular anger, both the government and the opposition are determined to go ahead with elections planned for September 16, with the ND doing its best to deny any connection between the current crisis and its own policies. Karamanlis even described growing criticism of his government as a "conspiracy."

The September elections were called one year early in order to achieve, in Karamanlis's words, a "strong popular mandate." He had hoped that an early election would improve his chances and create the best conditions for his program of massive budget cuts and tax "reform" planned for 2008.



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