At least 128 dead in Australia’s worst ever bushfires

Margaret Rees, Patrick O’Connor
9 February 2009

At least 128 people have died in bushfires and firestorms which swept through parts of the south-eastern state of Victoria on the weekend. The worst fire disaster in Australia's history has left a devastating toll, with hundreds injured including dozens with severe burns, more than 750 homes destroyed, and at least 330,000 hectares (815,000 acres) of land razed. The Red Cross has registered more than 3,700 evacuees, but the number of people made homeless is expected to increase substantially.

Entire towns have been wiped out, including homes, public buildings, shops, small businesses, community halls, police and fire stations; at least 12 major fires continue to burn and may take weeks to subdue according to fire fighting authorities; more than 100 people remain unaccounted for.

The death toll has already surpassed the number killed in the previous worst bushfire, the "Ash Wednesday" disaster on February 16, 1983 when 75 died people across Victoria and South Australia. This weekend's fires broke out on Saturday amid some of the highest temperatures ever recorded in Victoria. The state capital Melbourne reached a record 46.4 degrees Celsius (115 Fahrenheit). A few dozen kilometres to the north, gusting northerly winds quickly fuelled flames that spread in the tinder dry drought conditions made worse by last week's heat wave. (See "Australian heat wave kills 60 people, triggers power and transport chaos")

Some of the conflagrations were reportedly started by lightning strikes that ignited power lines or wooden power poles. Others are believed to have been caused by discarded cigarette butts; arson is also being investigated.

Most of the affected communities were small towns and hamlets north-east of Melbourne. In Kinglake, less than 50 kilometres from the state capital, 29 people died and 550 homes were incinerated. In the popular holiday resort of Marysville, further east, just one building was left standing. At least eight bodies have been discovered there. At Kinglake West, 20 people died. All along the road bodies were found in burnt-out cars. Many people, following the state government's "stay and defend or leave early" policy, had tried to save their homes and then unsuccessfully sought to flee once the scale and speed of the approaching fire became apparent.

Survivors described terrifying scenes of a firestorm that spread faster than many people could escape, even by car. The flames shot far into the sky, embers fell like rain, while the dust-filled smoke reduced visibility to near zero. Stephen Collins of Marysville told the *Australian*: "There had been a hot north wind all day, and at 5 p.m. the power went out and then the wind stopped. Everything went eerily quiet for about 10 minutes. Then the wind swung around and you could hear this extraordinary noise. It sounded like the rumbling stampede of cattle but in fact it was the fire coming up the valley."

One fire fighter, Ian Henley, described the fire as the worst he had ever seen. "It was pitch black, the heat was enormous, with flames 15 to 20 metres high as it crossed the road," he told the *Age*.

Chris Harvey, a Kinglake resident who lost his home, told the *Herald Sun*: "There's a five-car pile-up on the road into town, all the cars are burnt. The innuendo is that we can't go up there because there are cars all over the road, cars with bodies in them that have crashed with the doors flung open in the middle of the road. Everyone made a run for it. It was a most horrible day. It's going to look like Hiroshima I tell you, it's going to look like a nuclear bomb. There are animals dead all over the road."

Thousands of people throughout the state have been forced into emergency accommodation on sporting ovals and community centres, many of them searching desperately for family members still missing in fire-stricken areas.

As the fire raged nearby, Kinglake resident Peter Mitchell told ABC Radio there was no-one to fight it because crews were already confronting other fires across the state. "The whole of Kinglake is ablaze. I live a couple of [kilometres] out of town. I heard explosions. By the time I got to the road there were fires everywhere," he said. "There is flame everywhere, trees exploding, gas tanks exploding, buildings on fire. It's very, very, very serious."

Three schools have been incinerated and 72 others remain closed.

Dr John Coleridge from the Alfred Hospital Burns Unit said that tragic cases included multiple occupants of cars where only one person survived, and three members of the same family with horrific burns. He added that these could take three, six or twelve months to heal. Other victims may have limbs amputated. Dr De Villiers Smit, an emergency physician at the Burns Unit said the bushfire was "by far the worst disaster I have ever been involved in". Referring to the 2002 terrorist attack in Indonesia, he added: "This is far worse than Bali."

Disaster struck not only bush communities. In the regional centre of Bendigo, a firestorm hit just two kilometres from the city centre, killing two people and destroying 50 homes. One resident told the *World Socialist Web Site* that there was widespread confusion at the height of the fire, with power supplies down, some residents activating fire plans and others trying to drive around to find out what was happening.

The bushfires have also threatened Victoria's power grid. Rolling blackouts were imposed on more than 150,000 homes in regional areas on

© World Socialist Web Site

the weekend as fires hit power lines; some people are still without electricity. Melbourne's power supply is supposedly secure, despite one of the main power lines from the Latrobe Valley being cut by fire on Saturday night and another fire breaking out in a coal bunker at the Loy Yang power station.

In the midst of the tragedy and devastation, the question needs to be asked: why did the bushfires have such a terrible impact, and why did state and federal authorities not take basic preventative measures?

Saturday's weather conditions were not unexpected. Fire scientist David Packham, who has worked for the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Weather Bureau, warned days in advance that Victoria was facing the worst forecast fire weather he had seen in 50 years. He said the predicted soaring temperatures, combined with low humidity, high winds, and high fuel loads, would all combine on the same day.

"You've got fire danger indices and, especially if I recalculate them, are pretty much equal to the situation that occurred in Canberra," he told ABC Radio last Thursday, referring to the fires that killed four people and destroyed 530 homes in the nation's capital in 2003.

On Friday, the day before the fire's outbreak, Victorian Labor Premier John Brumby warned that Saturday could be "the worst day in the history of the state" and advised people to stay in their homes and look after elderly relatives and neighbours. But it appears that no serious steps were taken to develop a state-wide emergency plan to respond to the anticipated bushfires. Householders were advised to follow individual fire plans. Communities such as Kinglake and Marysville were left isolated to battle firestorms of extraordinary severity, with tragic results.

Many related questions remain unanswered. Why was no emergency appeal issued for resources, such as helicopter water and fire retardant bombers, to be brought in from the US and elsewhere? Just two advanced helicopters ("skycranes") were used. Nicknamed "Elvis" and "Elsie", each is capable of dropping 9,000 litres of water and then reloading from oceans or lakes in just 40 seconds. But how many others could have been mobilised? Was the decision not to bolster the air fire services made for budgetary reasons?

Questions also need to be raised about the level of funding and staffing of the state's professional fire fighting service. The emergency response has been largely dependent on volunteer fire fighters. About 3,000 volunteers with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) worked throughout the weekend with little or no sleep. Their heroic and self sacrificing efforts have been, deservedly, widely praised. But it is nevertheless the case that a stronger professional force is required in the well-known bushfire-prone Australian climate. The 3,000 volunteers assisted about 3,500 professional fire fighters with the Department of Sustainability and the Environment (DSE) and 100 with the Melbourne Fire Brigade. Almost 1,000 DSE and CFA trucks and 62 aircraft were deployed. Was any attempt made to assess in advance whether this level of manpower and resources would be adequate?

Moreover, it is unclear what procedures were put in place for alerting affected residents. Were possible evacuation routes discussed in advance? Was any collective and mandatory evacuation procedure considered? Was any check made on whether residents were prepared?

Mariel Govers, a pensioner who lives in the mountain hamlet of Mount Beauty, which is still surrounded by fire on two fronts, told the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday that smoke was coming up the Kiewa Valley, cutting off one road, and that the Ovens Valley was also affected, apparently leaving no effective way out. She said that she had been given little information.

"The authorities will just let us know if we are to evacuate," Govers said. "Where we go I have no idea. I guess we go to the Community Centre in the main street, but where to from there, I don't know. How do we get out? You'd think they would have learnt from the last fires and have a really good plan. They're telling people in Dederang they can stay and fight to save their homes. I couldn't do that, I'd be terrified. I'm going to the CFA [Country Fire Authority] to find out what is going on. There should be a long-term plan, from A to Z."

For all the outstanding questions, however, a concerted media campaign is already underway to head off any public criticism of the political establishment. Melbourne's liberal newspaper of record, the *Age* declared today: "now is not a time for recriminations, for asking what might have been avoided or what could have been done better".

Seeking to divert any critical examination of the circumstances leading up to the weekend's tragic events, virtually every major news outlet is instead promoting thinly-veiled mysticism, with elaborate ruminations on the character of "Mother Nature" and "evil". Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, speaking in Victoria where he travelled to announce that the Australian army could be used, declared, "Hell and all its fury has visited the good people of Victoria in the last 24 hours."

While investigations are still underway, and there is no clarity on whether any of the fires were deliberately lit, the media and major political parties are already whipping up a hysterical campaign against arsonists. The *Australian* devoted part of its editorial today, titled "The pain of fire, the evil of arson", to a denunciation of any attempt at a social explanation of arson. Instead, according to the Murdoch press, arsonists are simply evil and deserve more than the 15 years maximum jail sentence now available. Rudd appeared to throw his weight behind such a demand when he described arsonists as "mass murderers".

The federal government has announced it is donating $10 million to the victims—a sum that is grossly inadequate to cover the losses suffered by thousands of people. This miserly offer has contrasted with the generous response of ordinary people throughout Australia, who have rushed to donate money, food, blankets and clothes to different charity and emergency response appeals. This public reaction is of a piece with the numerous stories of extraordinary acts of solidarity and bravery committed by those caught up in the fires and in the surrounding communities.

The Labor government's reaction to the crisis stands in sharp contrast to the enormous public sums it has made available to the banks during the recent financial meltdown. In a rare moment of serious journalism, one ABC reporter yesterday challenged Rudd: "Given your $42 billion dollar bailout plan, can you also afford to commit to more medium term help?" In response, the prime minister simply evaded the question and offered more platitudes.

© World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site