

Wildfires threaten Greek capital

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Just two years after the forest fires of the summer of 2007, which devastated large tracts of land in Greece leaving nearly 70 dead, the country is once again suffering a series of wildfires concentrated in the north of the country and threatening the capital city, Athens.

The blazes began on Friday night in the Grammatiko region and spread quickly, fanned by high winds and continuing high temperatures. Over the weekend, the initial fire spread to the region of Mount Pendeli, burning down a number of properties.

In the meantime, the fire front has extended into the Athenian suburbs of Anthoussa, Anixi, Drafi, Palea Pendeli, Dionyssos, Pallini and Agios Stefanos. The flames from the forest fires, reaching hundreds of metres into the sky, could clearly be seen from the centre of Athens, and the city administration advised tourists visiting the country not to travel to the capital until the inferno had abated.

Wind carried the flames farther to Porto Germeno in the western part of Athens and is reported to be affecting large parts of the islands Zakynthos, Skyros and Euboea, and particularly the coastal town of Karystos.

Following the extension of the fires, the Greek government called a state of emergency for a wide arc northeast of the capital. Local authorities commenced evacuating thousands of residents from their homes in northern Greece and the suburbs of the Greek capital. Two children's hospitals, a home for the elderly and a convent have also been evacuated.

In addition to extensive damage to property, the fire threatens to precipitate an ecological disaster. The rich woodlands and olive groves to the north of Athens have been described as a vital lung for the city, emitting oxygen into the atmosphere and countering the capital's already notoriously high pollution levels.

Thousands of hectares of olive groves and forestland have already been destroyed by the vicious blaze, and experts are reckoning with long-term consequences for the capital city's climate and atmosphere.

With the devastation of the fires of 2007 still fresh in popular consciousness, many local residents were scathing in the failure of the local and federal authorities to react promptly to the latest fires. Many Greek residents are asking the question: Given the calamitous consequences of the 2007 fires that cost nearly 70 lives, why did the authorities fail to adequately prepare for future blazes?

Despite an appeal by the authorities to evacuate the fire region, thousands of local residents have chosen to stay and attempt to fight the blaze with their bare hands. Television footage over the

weekend showed local residents attempting to fight a wall of fire with buckets of water or with water from their own garden hoses. Other images showed desperate locals beating at smouldering bushes with branches.

One resident of the seaside resort of Nea Makri, near the town of Marathon where fires raged, pleaded on Greek television: "If they do not come right now, the fire will be uncontrollable. Please, bring two or three fire engines at least...for God's sake." Another resident reported that he had driven over a large part of the area and saw no firefighters.

The mayor of Marathon said he had been "begging the government to send over planes and helicopters," to no avail. "There are only two fire engines here; three houses are already on fire and we are just watching helplessly," Mayor Spyros Zagaris told Greek TV.

Meanwhile, the mayor of Anixi, one of the suburbs in Athens affected by the fires, admitted to the *Guardian* newspaper that the authorities were utterly unprepared for the fires: "Despite everything we were totally unprepared," Yiannis Nikitopoulos told the paper, adding, "So far our endeavours to put out the flames have been obstructed by a complete lack of communication. There is no coordination between the police, firefighters or local authorities. It's chaos."

Nikitopoulos also made clear that, in his opinion, most of the blazes in the region over the weekend were likely the work of arsonists determined to clear land for developers.

In 2007, it emerged that property speculators were behind many of the fires that raged through large parts of the country. Greek law prevents forested areas from development. On a host of occasions in the recent past, however, it has been proven that speculators burnt down woodland in order to be able to bid for the scorched land for redevelopment.

For the past two years, the environmental organisation World Wildlife Fund has been demanding that the Greek government introduce a stop to all building on land destroyed by forest fires. According to the WWF forestlands expert Nina Griesshammer on Monday, "Greece had learnt nothing from the catastrophic summer of 2007...the current fires were just a question of time."

The Greek Federation of Architects estimates that some 100,000 properties have been erected in Greece on such illegally acquired developmental land. The majority of the constructions are villas, and it is assumed 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 the widespread corruption in the country and a legal situation that encourages such

criminal enterprises. Greek governments led by the conservative New Democrats and the previous administrations headed by the social democratic PASOK movement have established a broad grey area regarding ownership rights, enabling companies and businessmen access to favourable building land in exchange for high bribes.

Another example of criminal negligence by the federal government is the issue of garbage disposal. The country has at least 400 public dumping grounds, many situated in proximity to woodland areas. With summer temperatures often in excess of 40 degrees Celsius, these waste dumps catch fire on a regular basis. The Greek authorities have been criticised on a number of occasions by European bodies for the neglect of its woodlands, but the latest blazes makes clear that if anything, the situation with regard to such practices has actually worsened since 2007.

The Grammatiko area where the fires began last Friday is at the centre of a dispute between local inhabitants and the government over the planned construction of a landfill.

Greek economy in crisis

The problems of Greek society, saddled with a traditionally deficient and underfinanced public infrastructure and a one-sided economy heavily dependent on shipping and tourism, have been compounded by the current financial crisis. According to one report released on August 10, industrial production fell by 11.4 percent in June from a year earlier, almost twice as much as economists had forecast. The European Union (EU) accounts for 60 percent of the country's tourism revenue, and visits to Greece were down almost 10 percent in the first six months of the year. The economic slump also has major consequences for the Greek shipping industry and curbed demand for exports.

Forced to bail out a number of its largest banks, which had heavily invested in ailing Balkan countries, the Greek government has run up the second highest level of debt (after Italy) in the EU. In its report on Greece of August 6, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) urgently warned the government to get a grip on its public finances—i.e., implement further reforms. In 2008, the conservative New Democracy (ND) government led by Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis overhauled the country's social security system, but the IMF has made clear that further drastic reforms are needed. In addition, the IMF is demanding further measures to make the Greek labour market more competitive.

The public outrage over the latest outburst of fires will only serve to increase the crisis of the already embattled Karamanlis administration. The ND government has stumbled along since the outbreak of widespread youth riots at the end of last year and a hasty cabinet reshuffle at the start of this year. The youth riots, which lasted more than a month, were triggered mainly by the lack of educational and job prospects in the country as a result of the economic and social cuts implemented by the government.

Another important impetus for the riots was the incompetence and corruption of a succession of Greek administrations, which

found a high point with the failure of the conservative government to combat the fires of 2007. New Democracy was only able to return to power in September 2007 with a razor-thin majority because of the complete collapse in support for the utterly discredited PASOK movement—the party that had dominated Greek politics since the overthrow of the military junta.

With the economy spiralling out of control and the government under increasing IMF and EU pressure for further radical budget cuts, Karamanlis has been expected to announce either a fresh cabinet reshuffle or a snap election at a major speech he plans to give in the first week of September.

According to the *Kathimerini* newspaper, quoting an ND source, the main argument for early polls is the dire state of the economy. This situation is detailed in an informal assessment requested by Environment and Public Works Minister Giorgos Souflias and Economy and Finance Minister Yiannis Papathanassiou.

In any event, the political opposition in Greece has made clear it is prepared to close ranks with the ND administration and will not seek to challenge the government on its handling of the latest series of blazes. PASOK leader George Papandreou visited the afflicted area and noted that “now is not the time to assess the cause and reason for the fires but to stand by our fellow citizens in trouble.” The Coalition of the Left (Synaspismos) stated in a conciliatory tone that “at this time, the full utilisation of all the means to restrict the conflagration is necessary, before we mourn even worse things.”

The only organisation to remind the Greek electorate that the same government was behind the disastrous failure to deal with the fires of 2007 was the extreme nationalist Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS), led by George Karatzaferis. While criticising the ND government over its treatment of the fires crisis, LAOS has made clear it is ready to form a coalition with New Democracy in a future government.



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