

Dozens die in Portugal's worst-ever forest fire

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More than 60 people have died, 62 have been injured and five villages evacuated in Portugal's worst-ever forest fire. The fire, which started on Saturday, has more than doubled the deaths recorded in the country's previous worst fire in 1966.

Last year, four people died and more than 100,000 hectares (400 square miles) were destroyed in fires. Between 2000 and 2013, Portugal, which comprises less than 10 percent of the landmass in Europe's Mediterranean region, recorded a third of the fires. The number of fires has increased from around 3,000 in 1980 to around 20,000 a year today.

Saturday's fire broke out in Pedrógão Grande in central Portugal and spread to the neighbouring municipalities of Figueiró dos Vinhos and Castanheira de Pera. Most of those killed had been driving on the main road between the two municipalities.

The national director of the Judiciary Police, Almeida Rodrigues, told reporters the immediate cause was lightning from a dry thunderstorm, in which rain evaporates before it hits the ground. It set a tree on fire and spread rapidly, in conditions of an intense heatwave affecting the country, low humidity and high winds.

Announcing three days of national mourning, Socialist Party (PS) Prime Minister António Costa described the blazes as "the greatest tragedy we have seen in recent years in terms of forest fires" and warned, "We will certainly find more victims on the ground." "This abnormal situation surpasses the normal response capacity of our forces," he added.

Interior Minister Miguel Constança Urbano de Sousa told reporters, "We are under extraordinary meteorological conditions that cannot be forecast, and are impossible to control by human beings."

Catarina Martins, leader of the Left Bloc which along with the Communist Party keeps the minority PS government, elected in 2015, in power declared, "The

fire that is occurring in Pedrógão Grande and Castanheira de Pera has assumed the dimensions of a tragedy that we have never seen before."

Attempting to deflect criticism away from Costa and the PS, Martins said "at the moment" it was necessary to concentrate on "national and international solidarity towards the local population," for "everyone to comply with safety rules and to be alert to Civil Protection appeals" and for the media, "to ensure the necessary respect towards the victims."

She added, "Of course there will be an evaluation later. We know that we have problems in the country that have been badly resolved for a long time, but... We'll have time for everything else later."

The truth is that there have been countless evaluations after previous disasters, which have been ignored by successive governments.

Former Alentejo firefighter, Nelson Rosado, on the Facebook site, Special Unit for Combating Forest Fires 2017, said, "Does anyone know, or better, the international press know that a prisoner earns twice as much to clean the beaches as a firefighter puts out fires?"

"We do not want money, we want the Government once and for all to know how to give us the due value and respect."

"As long as there is business in our forest every year people will die and lose their lives. As for us firemen, we will always be despised," Rosado concluded.

Writing on the firefighters website Bombeiros.pt, former Fireman Sérgio Cipriano declared, "What failed on Saturday? Everything, as it has failed for decades."

"It was not known where the lightning was going to fall, but many warned that wherever it fell it would be a disaster.

"There is strictly nothing new to say. Everything has been studied, explained and written in the last decade and a half. There were commissions of all shapes and

sizes. And a lot of serious work was done. But everything else was missing. They did not want to deal with forest fires... The integration of prevention and fire-fighting was lacking... They did not think long term. And everything has been postponed the same as always: making the forest a priority, making a third of the national territory a priority.”

Cipriano is referring to the dozens of inquiries held and reports produced after fires in 2003 that destroyed 425,000 hectares (1,650 square miles), nearly 5 percent of the country, and 340,000 hectares (1,300 square miles) two years later.

They identified the problems associated with the fact that Portugal is particularly vulnerable to fires, not only because of its Mediterranean climate but also because of climate change, which has extended the wildfire season from two to up to five months over the last 50 years. Portugal has the highest proportion of forest area in Europe (38 percent), most of which (85 percent) is in private hands and poorly managed or abandoned or planted with acres of highly flammable Eucalyptus trees, owned by paper production corporations.

According to academics Paulo Mateus and Paulo Fernandes, “The Portuguese forest service (PFS) went through copious and frequent changes in the last four decades, which clearly signals lack of understanding of its role by policy and decision makers. The PFS organization is highly volatile since 2003, with consecutive organic restructuring and changes in objectives and strategies that disturb functioning and compromise the definition and attainment of long-term goals” (Forest Fires in Portugal: Dynamics, Causes and Policies, August 2014).

The reports called for a forest fire defence plan that focused on prevention and completely overhauled and co-ordinated firefighting.

A Forest Fire Protection Plan (PNDFCI) was implemented by the PS government of José Socrates (2005-2011) but according to Cipriano, it was seen as “too ambitious” and “reduced to its smallest expression.” The Fire Analysis and Use Groups, which were created and “had an essential performance in the early years” were by 2008 “already being demobilized” and the rules governing forest management “were being forgotten” and the plantations authorised haphazardly. The Ministry of Internal Administration responsible for firefighting at the time was led by none

other than António Costa, the current prime minister.

Since it came to power in 2015, the PS government, despite all protestations that it has rejected austerity, has continued on the same path. This year it has cut the Environment Agency’s paltry €1.5 billion budget by 10.5 percent.

Mário Centeno, the PS finance minister, has won the plaudits of the European Union and International Monetary Fund for his “unwavering commitment” to cutting the fiscal deficit to the lowest since democracy was restored in Portugal in 1974. Portugal has repaid loans more than it was required to at the same time as bailing out a series of banks.

A recent report stated that international businesses were returning to Portugal because of its low wages and lack of industrial strife. Bond ratings agency Moody’s said it is considering moving Portugal from junk status to investment grade—but only if the government “make further ambitious strides to bring down the deficit with faster fiscal consolidation,” i.e., more austerity.

This is the government that the pseudo-left Left Bloc and Stalinist Communist Party are maintaining in power.



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