

Death toll rises from Greek forest fires

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The official death-toll from the fires in the Eastern Attica region of Greece rose to 96 after a 68-year-old man in intensive care died August 14. He was the thirteenth fire victim to die in hospital.

According to reports, 29 people remain in hospital, with eight in intensive care.

The Fire Service has declared that there are two remaining unidentified bodies, with the caveat “that [they] have available DNA.” But according to some reports, the death toll is likely to be higher, given that there are six bags to be examined from the scene—each of which most likely contains the remains of more than one person.

According to the General Secretariat for Civil Protection, the Attica region still has a fire risk status of category 4 (very high). Just over a week ago, another large fire broke out on the island of Evia off the coast of Attica, 57 miles north of Athens. According to reports, around 500 people were evacuated as a precaution from the villages of Kontodespoti and Stavros. Like Attica, Evia also continues to have a category 4 fire risk status.

Since the tragedy, much of the media has concentrated on the high number of illegally constructed buildings. In an interview with *RealNews* last week, Giorgos Stathakis, the Environment Minister of the pseudo-left Syriza government, stated that 200-300 buildings that have been built illegally in forests, coastal areas and by riverbeds, have been earmarked for demolition by the middle of September. Stathakis said earlier this month that there are 2,300 illegally built buildings within forests and 700 on the beach in the region.

Illegal construction played a central role in the havoc wrought by the fire, but this has only happened with the complicity of successive governments. All the major parties have bent over backwards to accommodate the predatory interests of the construction and tourism

sector in developing prime real estate locations like Mati and to eventually legalise buildings that were constructed illegally.

In interviews with different news outlets, former environmental inspector Margarita Karavasili—who was also in charge of urban development in Mati 25 years ago—painted a devastating picture of what passes for urban planning in Greece:

“I remember that it was impossible for [Mati] to be included in the plan given that more than 80 percent of the area was forest. There was a lot of pressure on me to exempt parts of the region and lift their definition of woodland. Perhaps these pressures yielded results in the years that followed after I left the ministry.

“At times I felt threatened in the sense that if I didn’t do [what they asked] you and your children would be in danger. This was well known to ministers whom we would inform. We tried to protect ourselves, in order to do our job properly.

“From 2006-2008 pressures intensified again, that construction spread up the beach sealing off the beach in all its lengths with houses, clubs and hotels. It seems that in Mati, where the tragedy took place, there was no access to the beach because of all the walls.

“In Mati there were not sufficient roads. There was the issue of the fact that the entire coastal and beach area had been blocked off by hotels, buildings and fences, despite the fact that buildings have to be 100 metres away from the beach.”

Far from ushering in a new regime of urban planning, the demolitions will be subordinated to the same commercial interests that led to the tragedy.

The municipality of Marathon, where Mati is located, has already petitioned for the area not to be reforested, while Stathakis stated, “The way in which we will be able to reconstruct Mati is through the method of Special Spatial Planning, a flexible tool, which is mainly used in big investment projects, but which we

have also chosen for instances of natural disasters.”

This situation is hardly unique to Mati. A recent report by state broadcaster ERT covered the legal battle between locals and property owners, who block access to the sea along 1km of the coastal road in the Kasandra peninsula in the Chalkidiki region of Northern Greece. Home to large areas of forestland, Chalkidiki is vulnerable to forest fires, and its current fire risk status is category 3 (high). Residents in the area recounted how a forest fire in 2006 in the area did not claim any victims, given that access to the sea still existed at that time.

The demolitions ordered by the government also seek to cover up the underfunding in the fire service, with forest protection now allotted only a paltry 0.035 percent of the national budget while the fire service’s budget has been severely cut in the last eight years since the first austerity programme was signed with the European Union and International Monetary Fund.

Speaking to the *Observer*, the head of the Federation of Firefighters, Dimitris Stathopoulos, stated that 30 percent of fire engines were useless due to the cuts. “About 15% of our fleet of 1,750 trucks are off the roads because they have chronic problems and are old,” he said. “Another 15% are in need of spare parts which we can’t afford.”

Fire victims have demonstrated outside parliament to protest inadequate governmental assistance to victims of the fire. Syriza has earmarked a paltry €5,000 benefit per property affected, with just over 4,000 applications lodged so far.

The government’s response is in stark contrast to the response by the working class, which mobilised to provide drugs, food, water and other essentials to the victims. An outpouring of solidarity came from workers in neighbouring Turkey who defied the nationalist rhetoric stoked by the ruling elites of both countries and posted messages of solidarity—with #Yunanistan (Greece in Turkish) becoming one of the top hashtags trending globally, while “get well soon neighbour” was a top trend in Turkey. Hundreds rallied at the end of last month in the coastal city of Izmir outside the Greek consulate in solidarity with the victims.

In response to the public backlash against the government’s handling of the fire, Syriza Civil Protection Minister Nikos Toskas resigned on August

3.

Syriza bears a large responsibility for the tragedy, having been in power for three and half years in which it has imposed crushing austerity measures. In March, 2017, Syriza implemented €34 million in cuts to the fire service, and their cuts to the public health service and other emergency services were critical factors in the deaths of so many people in preventable fires.

Syriza is now so widely hated that it polls at an all-time low of 12 percent, while its right-wing junior partner, the Independent Greeks, has an approval rating of just 1 percent.

A criminal lawsuit with the charge of “manslaughter with intent and possible malice” has been launched by Barbara Voukaki, who lost her husband and two children in the blaze, against leading members of the central and local government, including Toskas, Interior Minister Panos Skouletis, Attica Prefect Rena Dourou and Marathon Mayor Ilias Psinakis, as well as senior fire service and police officers.

The lawsuit states, “The charges against politicians concern the fact that they had not opened roads, had not prepared for the summer season, had not created fire-protection zones, had not provided working hydrants and water trucks, had not informed residents to evacuate their homes, and finally did absolutely none of the things that the law provides for.”

With the suit citing members of parliament and sitting ministers, before the case goes forward there must be a vote on whether to lift immunity on the MPs and ministers named. Given the current public mood, this could easily escalate the crisis in the government. Fytrou’s lawyer Vassilis Kapernaros stated, “It’s a case in which there is ample evidence regarding the oversights of those responsible. There will be a lot of revelations.”



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