Wildfires rage along South Korea’s east coast

Ben McGrath
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Wildfires along South Korea’s east coast and other parts of the country have caused massive destruction in recent days as firefighters struggle to bring the blazes under control. As of Tuesday morning, the main fire located in Uljin County and neighbouring areas had burned approximately 21,765 hectares of land, making them the most destructive wildfires in 22 years. Thousands have been forced to evacuate.

The fire in Uljin, located in North Gyeongsang Province 330 kilometres southeast of Seoul, began the morning of March 4 and quickly spread north to the neighbouring city of Samcheok in Gangwon Province. Approximately 18,000 firefighters, 95 helicopters, and 781 vehicles on the ground have been deployed to fight the blaze. Only about 50 percent of the fire has been extinguished, with little progress made from Monday. The fires have been fuelled by strong winds and dry conditions. Dry weather warnings are in place for the east coast while much of the remaining parts of the country are under dry weather advisories.

Other fires on the east coast have been reported in recent days in Gangneung City, which spread south to Donghae City, both of which are just north of the Uljin blaze. About 90 percent of this fire has been extinguished. Wildfires also continue to burn in Yeongwol County, Gangwon Province and Dalseong County in Daegu, with 60 and 40 percent of each being extinguished respectively. According to the Ministry of Interior and Safety, there have been 245 wildfires during the period from January 1 to March 5, an increase of 110 over the average for the same period for the last three years.

The Korea Forest Service and police do not yet know what caused the Uljin fire, but the authorities suggest it started from a cigarette butt thrown from a car. Based on surveillance footage, they are currently looking for the owners of three vehicles that passed through the area where the fire originated. A court has, however, issued an arrest warrant for a 60-year-old suspect accused of starting the Gangneung fire. The man supposedly told police he started the fire after being “disrespected” by other residents for many years.

The Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasure Headquarters reported that at least 7,355 people have been evacuated. Approximately 1,000 of the evacuees have been forced to stay in cramped, temporary shelters in public facilities and schools. At least 512 buildings have been damaged, including 343 homes.

No direct casualties have been reported yet, though an 86-year-old woman reportedly died while evacuating from Gangneung. No cause of death has been released. In addition, a 51-year-old firefighter was discovered dead on March 6. His family explained that he had been overworked and on the job for five days straight before passing away. They also stated that he had worked more than 50 hours per week for the past three months. This underscores a lack of government resources to deal with wildfires, which are common occurrences.

Many victims, already facing poverty, have lost everything. An evacuee in his 60s told the Yonhap News Agency, “My house was burnt down and I have no hope. All I have now is my body and the clothes I'm wearing.” Poverty among the elderly in South Korea is the highest among members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, with 43.4 percent of people over 65 living under the poverty line.

On Sunday, the Moon Jae-in administration declared the area around the Uljin fire a special disaster zone. “The fastest way for the government to support the residents is to declare a special disaster zone and to take part in recovery efforts,” Moon stated after meeting with victims on Sunday. On Tuesday, the government added Gangneung and Donghae as special disaster zones.

The declaration supposedly means that the government will share the costs of rebuilding homes

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and other buildings. For private buildings, the government will cover 70 percent of the cost and 50 percent for public facilities. Residents will also receive a grace period on their bills and taxes while receiving an additional income the government claims will be enough to provide a stable living.

The two major candidates in today's presidential election also stopped in the Uljin area for photo ops with evacuees. Neither Lee Jae-myung of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea nor Yoon Seok-youl of the main opposition People Power Party had anything to offer victims outside of empty phrases and vague promises to rebuild. Yoon, for example, told a distressed evacuee who had lost his home, "When the wildfire is over, all the homes will be rebuilt. Don't worry." Then adding, "The country will rebuild everything."

Compounding the disaster is the current explosion in COVID-19 cases. Evacuees in shelters are packed closely together and unable to properly social distance. The past week has averaged more than 210,000 new cases each day with a record high of 266,850 cases recorded on March 4.

The government's response to disasters like wildfires and a deadly pandemic exposes the class realities in South Korea. For the working class and poor, the government provides the bare minimum it believes is required to prevent a political backlash. Meager government assistance while recovering from a devastating fire or a few hundred thousand won (100,00 won equals $US 81) for people who have lost their jobs in the pandemic is considered generous.

In contrast, when the pandemic struck, Seoul quickly moved to assure the banks and big business that no demand for government handouts was too big. In March 2020, then Bank of Korea Deputy Governor Yun Myeon-sik stated, "It is hard to estimate how much liquidity will actually be supplied (to financial firms). But the plan is to supply the entire amount requested and without a limit."

While the exact moment of an outbreak of a disaster like a wildfire cannot be predicted, the response can be carefully prepared, including the establishment of properly response prevention planning, warning systems and emergency services. Instead, the capitalist class in South Korea, as in all capitalist countries, is driven by its own financial interests, not the needs of the vast majority of the population.

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