

Wildfires raging across southern Europe and north Africa kill more than 40 people

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A catastrophe is engulfing southern Europe and north Africa as forest fires rage across nine countries—Greece, Portugal, Turkey, Italy, France, Croatia, Spain, Algeria and Tunisia—endangering a population of around 500 million people.

Wildfires have become more devastating in recent years as a result of capitalism-driven climate change, resulting in scorching weather and winds of up to 35 miles an hour. With the 20 days from July 3 the hottest ever recorded on the planet, it is set to be confirmed that this month will be the hottest since records began and most likely in 120,000 years.

More than 40 people have been killed so far, 34 in Algeria when surrounded by flames in an evacuation attempt. The heat according to witnesses felt “like a blowtorch”. Five lives have been lost to the fires in Greece, including pilots of a firefighting plane. At least eight people have been killed in Italy, including in Sicily, where temperatures are now just below the record for Europe of 48.8 degrees Celsius, set in 2021. Firefighters in the country have tackled almost 1,400 blazes nationwide, including 650 in Sicily and 390 in Calabria, reported the *Guardian*. A number of news reports stress that the death toll is likely much higher.

This week, Italy also saw deadly torrential rain, tornadoes, and floods in the north of the country, with a 16-year-old girl among the four fatalities.

Workers are being killed on the job, forced to labour in unsafe temperatures. On July 20, a 46-year-old Greek worker suffered a heatstroke and died after making deliveries for a local tavern at the peak of the heat that day. According to the hospital management at Halkida General Hospital, the probable cause of his death was “cardio-respiratory arrest after exposure to very high temperatures.”

Workers at several factories and other workplaces in Italy have walked off the job, in order to protect themselves, in protest at being forced to work in dangerous heat. These included a four-hour strike July 20 at the Rossi auto parts factory in Modena, and a series of strikes in the last hour of each shift at an auto parts factory owned by the Japanese multinational HI-LEX in Chiavari near Genoa,

reported *Euronews*. The latter began when the company refused to keep the air conditioning on after 7pm, despite the last shift ending at 10pm. A strike was threatened last week at the Magneti Marelli car battery plant in Sulmona.

Workers in two McDonald’s kitchens in Apulia started a strike on Sunday due to the temperatures in the kitchen. ANSA reported that the strike broke out after McDonald’s closed one of the two restaurants to the public, but kept the other open, arguing the air conditioning was sufficient.

Greece has been at the epicentre of the fires, with the Greek Fire Brigade fighting a losing battle against more than 500 blazes for almost two weeks. On Thursday, the fire brigade said the situation remained “extreme” for several regions, with the Ministry of Climate Crisis & Civil Protection warning of a very high risk of fire in seven regions Thursday-Friday, including Attica (the location of the capital Athens) and on the country’s largest island Crete.

When the fires initially broke out they came within a few miles of Athens, a metropolis of 3.6 million people. That the fires are still out of control was clear on Thursday as fire, carried by strong gusts of wind, again reached the outskirts of the city, disrupting motorway traffic and rail services. Firefighters in water-dropping helicopters and a ground crew put out a blaze in Kifissia, just north of Athens.

Near Volos, a wildfire burned on two fronts, shutting part of Greece’s busiest motorway for several hours, and forcing the delay of national rail services near the area.

Harrowing scenes on the island of Rhodes, one of many popular tourist destinations in Greece—where firefighters battled fires for a 10th successive day Thursday—were described as “hell”. Worsening annual fires threaten the resident population of 125,000 and a tourist population of tens of thousands.

At the beginning of the week Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis’s government was finally forced to mount what was Greece’s biggest evacuation ever by land and sea, moving around 20,000 people from many villages and holiday resorts. Most were moved from Rhodes, with thousands also evacuated from Evia and another major

tourist destination, Corfu. Tourists were told to immediately leave their hotels, many of which were subsequently burnt to the ground, and forced to flee on foot as the fires reached the seaside villages of Kiotari, Gennadi, Pefki, Lindos, Lardos and Kalathos.

Thousands, including the elderly and children, walked for up to seven miles, many dragging their suitcases, fearing death as smoke filled the air and the fires closed in on them from behind. No contingency plans were in place, aside from people receiving a government alert text on their phones telling them to leave the area. The majority were forced to spend the night and days after wherever they could escape the fires, alongside locals who also had to flee—on beaches, in gyms, school buildings, indoor stadiums and hotel conference centres.

Social media was flooded with comments including: “Currently stranded in Rhodes escaping the wildfires on foot—left everything at the hotel and fled with towels across our faces”; “My youngest just told me he doesn’t want to die. Terrifying situation here”; “[We] had to walk four miles in the heat across dirt tracks in smoke and ash with a five year old. No possessions”.

Many explained that the only help they received was from the local population, not the government, airlines or holiday companies that provided their vacations and flights. It was not until Wednesday, after two weeks of fires, that a state of emergency initially in place in just the south of Rhodes was extended to the entire island.

Greece’s economy is dependent on tourism, which accounts for 25 percent of GDP and one in five jobs. Rhodes alone receives around 150,000 tourists at a time, more people than the resident population, with 2.5 million tourists on the island overall last year. Keeping the economy open to reap the profits and allowing tourists to flood in despite the perilous situation has been the priority of the right-wing New Democracy government.

As the heatwave and fires broke out, the world was shocked by scenes of thousands of people atop the Acropolis in Athens, a major tourist attraction which the government kept open. The Acropolis offers no shelter and the only measure taken by the government was to shut it for a few hours during the hottest parts of the day. It was left to the Red Cross and volunteers to provide tourists with bottles of water, and offer them umbrellas to shade.

Before any deaths had taken place, Prime Minister Mitsotakis washed the government’s hands of any responsibility, declaring in parliament, “Fortunately despite the unprecedented onslaught of the fires there have been no lives lost or serious injuries, proving once again that against nature’s assault no measures would ever be enough”.

Even as mass evacuations were underway on Monday, and

with Mitsotakis stating that Greece was “at war” with wildfires, his tourism minister, Olga Kefalogianni, told the BBC that UK holidaymakers—which make up the largest portion of those visiting Greece—should not cancel holidays already booked as, “It’s particularly important to stress only a small part of the island of Rhodes is affected”. Meanwhile tourists arriving were finding their hotels and other accommodation were out of bounds due to wildfires.

The vast majority will be uncompensated as airlines and holiday firms classify fires an “act of god”—a move facilitated by the UK government and others stopping short of advising against travelling to Rhodes, Corfu and other islands.

Any ability to respond effectively to the emergency has been critically undermined by the gutting of social infrastructure over the last 15 years amid continent-wide austerity.

More than any other country, Greece was devastated by this offensive, carried out by all political parties, with a major role played by the pseudo-left Syriza. There is, absurdly, a dire lack of firefighting planes in the country, leaving the cut-back firefighting service totally overwhelmed, especially in many rural areas in which around 2 million people (19 percent of the population) reside.

In Rhodes, there have often been no fire brigade personnel available to confront the fires, only volunteers, with one resident declaring, “If it weren’t for the volunteers, we would have been burned alive”.



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