

18 migrants killed as fires rage in Greece and southern Europe

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Europe's "Fortress Europe" policy led to the horrific deaths of at least 18 migrants in Greece Tuesday.

The migrants were burnt to death as wildfires continued to rip through Greece, with their charred bodies found by the fire service in the Dadia Forest near a shack outside the village of Avantas, north of Alexandroupolis. Among the dead were 16 adult males and two children. Pavlos Pavlidis, the coroner for Alexandroupolis said, "They were all found in groups of two or three at a distance of five hundred metres, apparently while trying to escape, and some of them had been burned in a shed [where livestock are usually kept]."

The authorities had no reports that any locals were missing in the area and thousands of people had evacuated the area, with a 112 emergency message sent to their mobile phones.

The terrible plight facing asylum seekers is evidenced in this tragedy. Those who perished had made the perilous crossing in the Evros region near the border with Turkey and had been hiding in forests north of the port city Alexandroupolis. In the hours leading up to their deaths, surrounded by encroaching fires and breathing in air filled with toxic smoke, they had not alerted the authorities of their presence out of fear of the consequences.

The BBC reported Wednesday that a Syrian man "has told the BBC he fears his 27-year-old cousin died in the blaze as he has been unable to reach him for four days. The cousin was among a group of Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis hoping to follow a well-worn path through the forest.

"The Syrian said they would not have called Greek authorities for help, despite the evacuation order, for fear of being sent back across the border to Turkey."

Many more migrants could be dead due to the fires and the brutal anti-immigration regime they face in Greece. Alarm Phone, a volunteer organisation which asylum seekers can call when in danger posted a tweet Tuesday

afternoon: "We are in contact with 2 groups of ~250 people in total, who are stranded on different islets of the #Evros river! One group shared a video of the fires raging nearby. They say 'The fires are getting very close to us now. We need help as soon as possible!'"

Around an hour later they posted another message:

"We received a new alert for a group of ~9 people near #Soufli in the #Evros area! They tell us one person struggles to breathe. They unable to move due to the nearby fires and worry they will die. They need urgent help. @hellenicpolice : evacuate them now!"

Greece's right-wing New Democracy government responded with a statement, abdicating all responsibility for the deaths and using them to whip up further anti-immigration sentiment. Shedding crocodile tears, Migration and Asylum Minister Dimitris Keridis declared the government's "great sadness" at the loss of life, and "despite the continuous and persistent efforts of the Greek authorities to protect the borders and human life, this tragedy confirms, once again, the dangers of illegal immigration."

The situation in Greece has worsened drastically since the initial outbreak of wildfires last month. In the area where the bodies were found wildfires had been raging for a fourth day and continue to burn. Evacuation orders were issued for villages in Greece's northern regions of Alexandroupolis, Komotini, Kavala and Orestiada, the central region of Viotia and the island of Evia.

On Monday, an elderly shepherd died trying to save his flock near the village of Prodormos, in the prefecture of Viotia.

In Alexandroupolis, more than 13,000 people were evacuated Monday and Tuesday, of a population of around 72,000. A major hospital in the city was evacuated late Monday, with 160 patients transferred, including 65 on a ferry, to other health centres in northern Greece. The *Financial Times* reported, "A woman had to give birth in

an ambulance on Monday night as she was being escorted from the hospital.”

Greece is no longer able to even adequately safeguard some of its key NATO infrastructure, vital in the military bloc’s war against Russia in Ukraine. The port of Alexandroupolis on the Aegean Sea provides crucial road and rail links north through the alliance’s eastern flank, and access to Ukraine via Bulgaria and Romania. In July, fires set ablaze a military warehouse just miles from the major military air base in Nea Anchialos, central Greece. The fires ignited ammunition setting off huge explosions, with bombs and ammunition for Greek F-16 fighter jets stored at the site.

The capital Athens, already threatened by the July wildfires, was again endangered when a fire broke out on foothills close to Mount Parnitha. The fire required the evacuation of a monastery and the closure of a section of Athens’ suburban road network. On the outskirts of the city of over 3.5 million people, a fire reached the industrial town of Aspropyrgos where four factories and five warehouse were set alight. According to state broadcaster ERT, explosions were heard. The authorities ordered the evacuation of several nearby villages.

On Monday, a new fire broke out in the central region of Boeotia, about 100 kilometres (62 miles) north of Athens, which saw the historic 10th-century monastery of Hosios Loukas burnt down.

Fires are raging on Greece’s Evia and Kynthos islands. A second fire broke out Monday on Evia burning forest and farmland near the town of Psachna.

Greece’s fire service has been overwhelmed by fires spreading due to prolonged record high temperatures and gale force winds. A spokeswoman told AFP, “There are nine active fronts... it’s a similar situation to July.”

The *Financial Times* reported, “Copernicus, the EU’s weather monitoring service, said that by July 22, more than 182,568 hectares—an area almost six times the size of Malta—had been reduced to ashes by wildfires. That figure was more than 40 per cent above the year-to-date average between 2003 and 2022, it said, with fires continuing to rage across the bloc.”

The catastrophe worsens, as reported by the *Press Project*, “More than 400,000 hectares have been burnt by the fires in the Greek territory in the last three days, according to the preliminary analysis of satellite data conducted by the Meteo unit of the National Observatory of Athens (NAA).” This included, “Approximately 380,000 acres in Evros; about 30,000 acres in Rodopi; 380,000 acres in Boeotia; almost 8,000 acres have been

burnt in Kythnos; about 5 000 hectares have been burnt in Psacha.”

The fires and destruction is being replicated across Europe’s southern states.

In Spain, a wildfire has burnt for a week on the popular tourist destination island, Tenerife. This forced the evacuation of 12,000 people as 15,000 hectares of land was burnt—fully 7 percent of the Canary island’s entire surface area.

A wildfire which started late Monday on the Italian island of Elba required the evacuation of 700 people from homes and a campsite.

There has been no co-ordinated response by the European Union. In response to the latest fires Greece’s fire service said that among six countries—Cyprus, Romania, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Germany and Serbia—just 120 firefighters had been sent via the EU’s civil protection mechanism to help fight fires.

Europe’s capitalist states are lavishing tens of billions of euros funding their war machines and the conflict in Ukraine, meaning that vital public services such as firefighting are being decimated. Greece’s cumulative budget cuts to the Fire Service exceeded €1 billion between 2010 and 2019 in austerity measures imposed by successive governments, including the pseudo-left SYRIZA from 2015.

Last week, the *Euronews* site reported, “In 2022, there were almost 360,000 professional firefighters—2,800 fewer than there were in 2021, according to the EU’s statistical office Eurostat.” France slashed its firefighting force by 5,446 workers between 2021 and 2022, the most of any EU country. Romania cuts its force by 4,250, and Portugal by 2,907. Devastating cuts have been imposed by eastern European states, with Slovakia cutting firefighter numbers by 30 percent, and Bulgaria (22 percent). Portugal cut numbers by 21 percent and Belgium 19 percent. The report noted “Latvia, Sweden, Hungary and Germany also saw cuts.”



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