

South Korea experiences worst-ever wildfires

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Massive wildfires tore through southeastern South Korea for 10 days at the end of March and were finally extinguished on Sunday. The fires have been described as the worst in the country's history, killing 30 people and destroying upwards of 48,000 hectares of land.

The blazes began in Sancheong County, South Gyeongsang Province on March 21. Over the next two days, there were 30 individual wildfires around the country. Separate fires broke out in Uiseong County, North Gyeongsang Province. It was this fire that quickly spread east across the region to other nearby cities and counties, including Andong, Cheongsong, Yeongyang and Yeongdeok.

The Uiseong fire, the largest of the blazes burning some 45,157 hectares, had supposedly been extinguished on Friday but reignited Saturday evening and was brought under control again on Sunday. The Sancheong fire was also contained on Sunday.

Among the fatalities, 26 died in the Uiseong fires while four were killed in the Sancheong fire. An additional 45 people were injured. Around 37,000 people were forced to evacuate, many of them elderly, but received little or no help from local governments. Several people died after being caught in their cars while attempting to flee.

A resident of Cheongsong in his 60s with the family name Kim stated that there was “no guidance (by the authorities) as to which direction was safe or dangerous” while evacuating, according to Yonhap News. “They just told us to evacuate quickly, so I just ran outside—but it was frustrating that there were no clear or proactive instructions.”

Evacuees also reported receiving conflicting information as they attempted to reach safety. Messages alerting people to evacuate were sent too late or did not inform people of the location of evacuation centers. In one example, the Yeongdeok County government

called for people to evacuate to the nearby towns of Ganggu or Namjeong, only to have the wildfires reach both within 30 minutes. Similar examples of confusion and conflicting information have been reported in other counties and towns.

Strong winds, dry conditions and rough terrain helped to spread the fires and made them more difficult to extinguish. An estimated 5,000 buildings including homes, factories and agricultural facilities were destroyed in the fires. Historical sites were also destroyed, including the Goun Temple in Uiseong, which had been built in 681 during the Unified Silla Period (668-935). Artifacts in the temple, however, were relocated. Houses and structures preserved from the Joseon Period (1392-1910) were also destroyed in the fires.

Police, firefighters and other related authorities began a joint investigation into the causes of the fires on Monday. At present, a 56-year-old has been accused of starting the fire that began at Uiseong as he tended to his grandparents' graves on a hillside. Media reports suggest that he attempted to clear branches from the graves by burning them. Embers spread, igniting the blaze. He has been charged without detention and has denied the allegations.

Acting President Han Duck-soo on March 26 declared, “The record for worst-ever wildfire is being rewritten.” He continued, “We have been confronting the worst ever wildfires by mobilizing all available personnel and equipment but the situation is out of the ordinary.”

Han recently resumed his role as acting president after the Constitutional Court rejected his impeachment. He serves in this position until the court rules on whether or not to remove President Yoon Suk-yeol from office after he was impeached for his failed attempt to impose martial law in December.

Wildfires are not uncommon in South Korea. Huge

wildfires also took place in North Gyeongsang Province as well as Gangwon Province in 2022. However, it is clear that the government was unprepared to deal with the current disaster.

Lee Cheol-u and Park Wan-su, the governors of North and South Gyeongsang Provinces respectively, both stated that firefighters lacked the necessary equipment and support to react quickly to the fires.

Lee stated, “We need to completely change the system for responding to wildfires. We need equipment that can put out fires early on with at least tens of thousands of liters of water, such as mobilizing transport aircraft like in other countries, and helicopters or firefighting equipment that can fly at night.”

Money that could be spent on preparing for natural disasters is being spent on preparations for war. Both governors are members of the right-wing People Power Party, which along with the Democratic Party, has backed the US-led war drive against China, funnelling huge amounts of money into these military preparations. Last year, South Korea spent 59.42 trillion won (\$US40.37 billion) on its military, or 2.8 percent of its GDP. This percentage is higher than most countries in the region. Seoul plans to spend 61.59 trillion won (\$US41.84 billion) this year.

At the same time, wildfires in South Korea and around the world are not simply the result of mistakes or the lack of equipment, but the criminal failure of capitalist governments to take the necessary steps to halt climate change. Extreme wildfire activity around the globe has more than doubled over the past two decades, with northern and temperate forest regions, which includes South Korea, being particularly affected.

The Korea Meteorological Administration reported in January that the yearly average temperature in 2024 was 14.5 degrees Celsius, or two degrees higher than the norm. This was the hottest since recordkeeping began 113 years ago. The previous record high was 13.7 degrees set in 2023. In addition, during the wildfires themselves, the temperatures in South Korea were 4.5 degrees to 10 degrees higher than the 1990-2020 average, according to Climate Central which conducts research on climate change.

Dry conditions and higher temperatures mean wildfire seasons are also lasting longer, exacerbating the conditions that worsen wildfires in countries like

South Korea and Japan, which recently experienced its own worst wildfire in 50 years.

Last year was also the hottest year on record globally, with the UN World Meteorological Organization stating in January that temperatures had risen 1.55 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels. This surpassed the 1.5-degree level that governments had agreed to keep temperatures below in the 2015 Paris Agreement.

The reality is that this supposed limit, itself inadequate to protect the environment, is being ignored as the major capitalist powers responsible for climate change base their policies on the profit interests of big business, not science and human need.



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