

Greece: Wildfires burn homes near Greek capital, residents flee

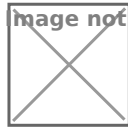


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Two wildfires, fanned by strong winds, raged uncontrolled through coastal towns near Athens on Monday forcing residents to flee their homes and prompting the evacuation of hundreds of children from a summer camp.

The blaze that broke out in the village of Kouvaras, about 27 km (17 miles) southeast of the Greek capital, spread fast amid erratic winds, a Greek fire service official said.

A Reuters witness said at least five houses were severely damaged by the fire which also tore through the seaside residential area of Lagonisi, a popular summer resort.

Police helped evacuate more than 100 citizens in the wider area. Dozens of horses were evacuated in trucks as the flames reached stables in the nearby areas of Kalyvia and Anavyssos.

“Due to high winds, the blaze spread across 12 kilometres in two hours,” Greek Fire Service spokesman Ioannis Artopoulos told a televised briefing, adding that police had detained a person suspected of arson.

More than 200 firemen assisted by 20 soldiers, 68 fire engines, 10 aircraft and six helicopters were fighting the flames.

Coast guard boats were patrolling along the coast to help evacuate citizens if needed, and more vessels were on standby in case they needed to intervene.

Around 1,200 children in a summer camp and the residents of a rehabilitation centre were evacuated due to another wildfire burning close to the seaside resort of Loutraki, about 50 miles west of Athens, a local mayor told Greek television.

About 135 firemen with 50 fire engines, 40 soldiers and 13 aircraft had been deployed to contain that blaze which forced police to shut part of a highway and disrupted train services.

A third fire broke out in the afternoon and was burning forest about 30 kilometres (18 miles) north of Athens, in the area of Dervenochoria.

Authorities said they were battling 81 blazes in total across the country on Monday, with the biggest fronts near Athens, and were bracing for more fires on Tuesday due to soaring temperatures and strong winds.

"Tuesday will also be a very difficult day. There is a very high risk for fires," Artopoulos said adding that strong winds will persist.

Wildfires are common in Greece in summer, but a dry winter has created tinderbox conditions.

Greece's recently re-elected Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, on trip for a leaders' summit in Brussels, said that he was being constantly briefed over the fires, which he attributed also to climate change. He urged citizens to follow civil protection rules.

"Today was the first really tough day of this summer. It is certain that more will follow. We've had, we have and will have fires, which is also one of the results of the climate crisis that we experience with increased intensity," he said.

The Greek meteorological service has warned of a high risk of fire this week, just as the country is recovering from the first major heatwave of the summer.

A second heatwave is forecast to affect the Mediterranean nation later this week.

Greece still has memories of a wildfire disaster in 2018, when a blaze killed 101 people in the seaside town of Mati, east of Athens.

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