

Chile brings fires under control as probe expands

January 4 2012



A helicopter carries a water bag to fight a massive forest fire affecting the commune of Ranquil, in southern Chile's Bio Bio region. Firefighters reported progress Wednesday in bringing under control wildfires in southern Chile that have destroyed about 45,000 hectares (112,000 acres) as a special prosecutor began investigating the source of the blazes.

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However, many of the 20 fires continued burning, particularly in the Bio Bio region about 500 kilometers south of Santiago.

Firefighters "are in a process of continuing to suffocate" the remaining

fires, Rene Garrido, fire chief of the Bio Bio region's Quillon commune, told local media.

One of the Bio Bio fires killed a 75-year-old man who refused to evacuate his home.

Garrido said tanker airplanes and helicopters that dropped water on the flames helped bring the fires under control.

After the flames were extinguished, firefighters returned to the areas where the fires were most intense to prevent further flare-ups from the current [hot weather](#), drought and [high winds](#).

About 24,800 hectares (62,000 acres) were destroyed in the Bio Bio region, 160 homes burned and 600 people displaced.

In the Maule region, fires that destroyed 6,650 hectares (16,512 acres), burned 30 homes and affected 200 families, also are under control, according to Carlos Bernal, the regional director of Chile's [National Emergency](#) Office (Onemi).

Firefighters reported that most outbreaks in the national park Torres del Paine, where the fires started a week ago, were no longer spreading. The fires consumed 14,504 hectares.

The park, which is visited every year by thousands of tourists, was partially reopened to the public Wednesday.

The suspicious nature of the Bio Bio fires is prompting a government investigation, led by prosecutor Julio Contardo.

Eight fires started simultaneously near a plant that is one of the world's largest producers of [cellulose](#). The plant was severely damaged by

flames.

Meanwhile, police have arrested a man accused of starting a fire that destroyed nearly 18 acres in the town of Tome.

The man confessed to igniting the flames by mishandling fireworks during New Year celebrations, according to local media reports.

An Israeli citizen, Rotem Singer, 23, is charged with starting the [fire](#) in the Torres del Paine park. He is accused of negligently trying to extinguish a burning roll of toilet paper, which he denies.

He was released from police custody but ordered not to leave Chile until an investigation is complete. He faces a maximum penalty of 60 days in jail and a fine of \$300.

Chilean President Sebastian Pinera blamed the La Nina weather phenomenon and "global warming" for contributing to drought conditions that helped the fires spread.

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