

Main forest fires in Portugal under control (Update)

June 22 2017, by Marianne Barriaux And Thomas Cabral



Firefighters battling a wildfire in Colmeal near Gois, where the blaze was tamed on Thursday

The main forest fires that have raged in Portugal since the weekend, killing more than 60 people, were brought under control on Thursday, the civil protection agency said, but grief and anger smouldered across the country.

The giant blaze broke out initially at Pedrogao Grande and spread to adjacent central areas including Gois, Pampilhosa da Serra and Arganil.

The fire in Pedrogao Grande, which ravaged 30,000 hectares (74,000 acres) of forests, was doused only late Wednesday as fire fighters contended with searing heat as well as rapidly shifting winds.

The blaze in Gois, the second biggest after Pedrogao Grande, was brought "under control" on Thursday, said Carlos Tavares, the civil protection official leading the operations, though he cautioned that some fires could resume.

Nearly 2,400 firemen and water-bombing planes, including aircraft sent from Spain, France and Italy, took part in the effort.

In both areas, temperatures were expected to fall after several days of intense heat, reaching 29 degrees Celsius (84 Fahrenheit), while in the rest of Portugal temperatures were forecast to top out at 34 Celsius.

Over the weekend, Portugal had sweltered under temperatures over 40 degrees Celsius in several regions.

Meanwhile, Spanish Agriculture Minister Isabel Garcia Tejerina on Thursday told lawmakers that conditions were worrying southwest Spain, hit by a drought.

Grief and anger

An estimated 204 people were injured during the Portuguese fires, and funerals began Wednesday for the 64 people killed.

"Now that the most threatening fires are under control, I have two words for this unprecedented human tragedy: pain and solidarity," said Prime

Minister Antonio Costa, as he left a cabinet meeting in Lisbon wearing a black tie.

"It is essential to fully clarify what happened," he added.

Press reports have suggested that Portugal's fire plan had not been revised for four years and that the intense heat might have made some communication antennae malfunction.

Interior Minister Constanca Urbano de Sousa late Wednesday acknowledged a partial failure in the country's communications systems.

But the president of the League of Firefighters, Jaime Marta Soares, said Wednesday that he believed arson had caused the fire, contradicting an earlier account by police.

On Sunday, police chief Almeida Rodrigues had ruled out arson, blaming dry thunderstorms for the blaze after saying they had found a tree hit by lightning.

Marta Soares told local news media the fire had already been burning for two hours before the storm started Saturday.

"I believe, until there is evidence to the contrary... that the fire was of criminal origin," he said.

Reacting to the claims, the president of the parliament Eduardo Ferro said the country "needs clear answers to legitimate doubts."

Questions also remain over how so many people could have died, most of them perishing on a single road that locals say should have been sealed off by first responders.

"My nephew died, a fireman" said Joaquim Serra da Fonseca, 68, in Castanheira de Pera, which sits along the N236 national road that has since been dubbed the "road of death".

As news of the fire spread on Saturday, his 40-year-old nephew and several colleagues rushed down the road to help.

Faced with the fury of the fire, they turned back but in the thick smoke, they apparently crashed into a car full of people, Serra da Fonseca said, and were caught by the flames as they tried to help the passengers.

The police moved to deflect the criticism, saying that at the time of the disaster it did not know the road was at risk.

"The fire reached this road in a completely unexpected, unusual and frightful manner," said the country's police chief in a document addressed to the government.

Questioned by the prime minister, the country's weather institute said it had been a particularly "complex and exceptional" situation, describing the strength of winds and intensity of the fire itself.

A weather phenomenon known as a downburst projected burning fragments in several directions, it added.

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