

Portugal forest fire smoulders as first victims buried

June 21 2017, by Marianne Barriaux With Emmanuelle Michel In Lisbon



Hundreds of firefighters were still battling the forest blaze in central Portugal on Wednesday

Hundreds of firefighters battled blazes in central Portugal on Wednesday as the funerals of some of the 64 people killed in the inferno renewed anger over the emergency response to the disaster.

Questions swirled over how so many people could have died in the forest [fire](#), most of whom perished on a single road that locals say should have been sealed off by first responders.

From early Wednesday, firefighting planes flew sorties over the smouldering forest canopy in the central Pedrogao Grande region, dropping water on the flames still licking pine and eucalyptus trees, according to an AFP journalist on the scene.

The head of the region's civil protection services Vitor Vaz Pinto told reporters that 95 percent of the fire had been extinguished.

"This is great progress," he added, as around 1,200 crew and 400 vehicles worked on dousing the flames.

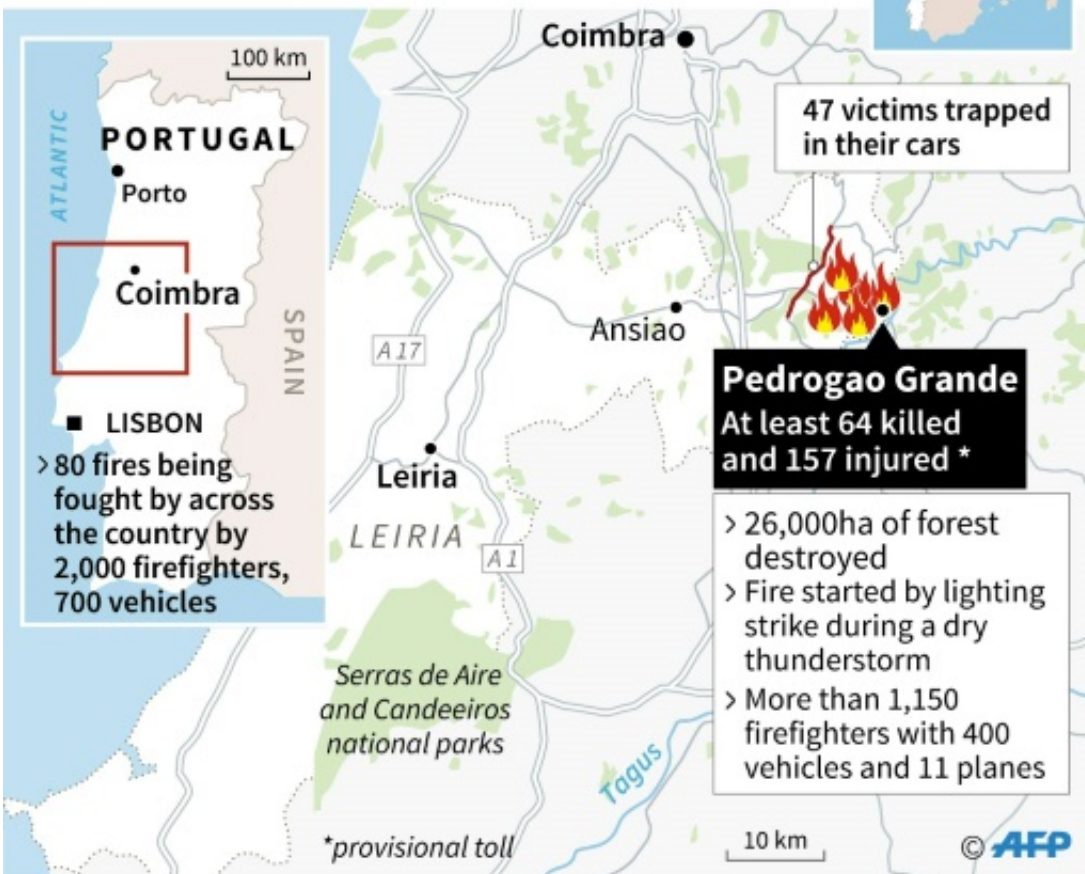
Wednesday's forecast also suggested more favourable firefighting conditions, with temperatures set to hit 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit), compared to 43 the day before.

The blaze appeared to have been brought under control on Tuesday, only for it to suddenly flare again, forcing authorities to evacuate 40 hamlets near the village of Gois.

Officials have expressed concerns that some residents are refusing to leave homes threatened by the flames.

Deadly fire in Portugal

Firefighters battling the massive blaze since Saturday



Hundreds of firefighters were still battling the forest blaze in central Portugal on Wednesday

"We have to protect our houses. I came to help my friends who live here," said Sonia Pereira, 29, who along with around a dozen people refused calls to leave.

Authorities now believe more than 200 people were injured in the blaze at the weekend.

Questions, anger mount

Details were emerging of the victims, many of whom were caught in their cars as they tried to flee. They included a four-year-old boy, Rodrigo.

His parents had left with him with relatives while on honeymoon and posted frantic messages on social media. The bodies of Rodrigo and his uncle were found burnt beside a car.

Most were killed on the N236 national highway, now dubbed the "road of death" by local media.

"My nephew died, a fireman" said Joaquim Serra da Fonseca, 68.



The fire in central Portugal was among the deadliest natural disasters ever seen in the country

As news of the fire spread on Saturday, the 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.

They stopped to try to get the passengers out, but in a matter of seconds the flames caught up.

Serra da Fonseca wondered why they were allowed to take the road when police knew that a fire was raging in the area.

Prime Minister Antonio Costa has questioned why the N236 had not been closed to traffic, and has sought explanations into why the emergency services communications network had been interrupted.

Press reports suggested Portugal's fire plan had not been revised for four years and that some communication antennae may have malfunctioned due to the intense heat.

As anger mounted among the relatives of those killed, the daily Publico reported that [civil protection](#) personnel and back-up fire crews only reached the fire site two hours after the first emergency calls.



Questions are mounting over how so many people could have died on a road engulfed by the fire

Costa has called for "immediate explanations" from authorities but insisted that there was "no evidence" of any rapid response failure.

'Martyrs'

The first funerals began late Tuesday not far from the still-burning forest. A large crowd gathered in the tiny hamlet of Sarzedas de San Pedro to bury six victims.

The front page of the *Correio da Manhã* showed images of tearful relatives next to pictures of some of those killed alongside a headline that read simply: "Martyrs".

Services will continue Wednesday and a nationwide minute's silence will be held.

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