

Questions over fire response as Portugal battles blaze

June 20 2017, by Marianne Barriaux And Thomas Cabral, With Emmanuelle Michel In Lisbon



Water-bombing planes and helicopters continued their runs over the blaze, which has been burning since Saturday

Questions were mounting Tuesday about the government's response to the raging forest fires that have claimed 64 lives, as more than 1,000 firefighters battled to contain it.

The blaze around Pedrogao Grande was expected to be under control shortly, said civil protection chief Vitor Vaz Pinto.

But as water-bombing planes made regular passes over the flames, there were growing questions as to whether the response to the disaster could have been better.

There were also suggestions that forestry practices and outdated emergency planning might have contributed to the disaster.

Some people in the hamlets scattered through this rural region were not happy with the response of the [emergency services](#).

Father Jose Gomes, the priest in Figueiro dos Vinhos, told AFP that some locals had "lacked the support of the fire fighters, and sometimes even water."

"There is a spirit of revolt towards the emergency services," he said.

Other people were asking if the roads where so many people died had been closed quickly enough on Saturday when the fires started.

Of the 64 people who died, 47 of them perished on the N236 highway, 30 of them trapped in their cars as the flames surrounded them.

An additional 157 were listed as injured, the emergency services said. They included seven people in a serious state, one of them a child.

Details were emerging of the victims, many of whom were caught in their cars as they tried to flee the blaze. 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 when they heard about the fires sweeping through the village of Nodeirinho in the Leiria region.

The bodies of Rodrigo and his uncle were found burnt beside a car, caught by the flames as they tried to flee the inferno.



Italy, France and Spain have sent water-bombing planes to battle the blaze

On Tuesday, 1,150 firefighters and nearly 400 vehicles were still battling the fires, helped from the air by water-bombing planes including some sent from France, Italy and Spain.

'This can't be nobody's fault'

Press reports suggested that the fire plan had not been revised for four years and that there had been communications problems while trying to contain the blaze.

Portugal's Publico newspaper reported that while the fire plan was meant to be revised every two years, in recent years lawmakers had not considered it a priority.

Le Jornal de Noticias said emergency services communications antennae had been damaged by the heat of the fires, hampering the work of the firefighters.

Climate change expert Joao Camargo pointed to the industrial-scale planting of eucalyptus, which is highly inflammable, in comments to Publico.

"These last decades, we have seen a rise in the frequency of [forest fires](#)" in Portugal, more than in other Mediterranean countries, he said.

The emptying out of the countryside as people leave for more urban areas also meant that there were fewer people to clear the brush that has fed the fires.

"This can't be nobody's fault," said Helder Amaral of the rightwing opposition People's Party (CDS) in a Facebook post.

"It is not enough for the president of the republic to kiss it better. Saying there is nothing to be done is not enough," he said.

Columns of smoke were still rising from the hills Tuesday morning, some of them still black, indicating active fire sights, AFP journalists reported.

The sky was clearer than a day earlier, and the water-bombing planes made regular runs over the lake below the village of Pedrogao Pequeno to refill and try to finish off the last seats of [fire](#).

Nearly 26,000 hectares of forest have already been destroyed by the fires, according to the European Forest Fire Information System.

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Citation: Questions over fire response as Portugal battles blaze (2017, June 20) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-response-portugal-blaze.html>

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