

# Questions swirl over Portugal fire's 'road of death'

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A firefighter in Vale da Ponte, Portugal, which declared three days of mourning after forest fires killed 64 people

Portugal's N236, now dubbed the "road of death", lies charred black from the devastating fire that swept from one side of forest to the other, trapping families and couples in their cars, and firefighters who had come to the rescue.

Road signs are burnt and unreadable, plumes of smoke rise from the ground on either side, and blackened car tracks cut across the tarmac, a grim reminder of the fierce blaze that killed 47 people Saturday, among the 64 victims of the giant fires.

Why were they caught in the inferno? Should the [road](#) have been blocked by police? Should they have been directed elsewhere?

Or was the [fire](#) moving so fast and unpredictably that there was nothing anyone could have done?

## **Fireman caught**

"My nephew died, a fireman" says Joaquim Serra da Fonseca, 68, serving drinks at the bar of his dimly lit restaurant in Castanheira de Pera, which the N236 cuts through.

The nephew, Goncalo Conceicao, a 40-year-old restaurant owner and father of an 11-year-old son, was a volunteer fireman.

He and several colleagues rushed down the road to the inferno just several kilometres away.

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 of the car, but in a matter of seconds the flames caught up.

Conceicao and four colleagues were pulled out alive, but seriously wounded.

He died two days later in hospital, and two other firefighters are still in

critical condition—one of them with burns on 65 percent of his body, said Thomas David, another local who knows them.

Serra da Fonseca said that many of those who met their death on the N236 had been spending the day at a popular resort with an artificial wave pool in Castanheira de Pera, and decided to go home when they heard about the fire.

He wonders why they were allowed to take the road south to the main IC8 road that goes through the area, even if that was the quickest route, when police knew that a fire was raging in the area.

"They should have told them to go the opposite way," he said, pointing to the N236 that runs past his restaurant into the hills above, where a thick cloud of smoke now hangs from another forest fire.

"It's longer but it was safer that day."

But for Samantha, a Briton who lives nearby, heading south appeared to be the quickest route for people who did not know the area well, particularly at a time of confusion when the fire was spreading at lightning speed.

"If you're a tourist, you go that way," she said.

"I don't think anyone knew the extent of it."

And on Saturday, there were only a few policemen working, said David, a 44-year-old cameraman who lives in Lisbon but who was visiting his parents.

"In the panic, they couldn't avoid the tragedy, it was impossible," he said.

## Never came back

Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Costa has queried why the N236 "had not been closed to traffic," according to the Lusa national news agency.

A survivor told Portuguese television that police directed them to the N236 as an alternative to the nearby IC8 route, which had been closed and which authorities were using themselves.

As a result, the victims would have been coming north towards Castanheira de Pera, while those leaving the pool were heading south.

Somewhere along the road, the fire hit them all.

David said he wondered why people decided to leave the resort with its large pool, which now stands temporarily closed and empty.

"If they had stayed there, nothing like this would have happened," he says, his face grim as he and others prepare to bury Goncalo.

At the bar where he stands talking with friends, four posters have been put up in memory of other local victims.

Antonio Nunes, his wife and friend had jumped into a car to go pick up his brother Nelson, who had phoned for help as the fire neared his home in a nearby village, David said.

They never made it back.

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