

Australia orders evacuation of fire-ravaged towns before heatwave

January 2 2020, by Holly Robertson



Tourists have been urged to flee popular holiday spots at risk from huge fires ripping through the area

Australia ordered residents and tourists out of the path of raging bushfires Thursday as the country braced for a weekend heatwave

expected to fan the deadly inferno.

Catastrophic blazes ripped through the country's south-east on New Year's Eve, killing at least eight people and stranding holidaymakers.

New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian declared a seven-day state of emergency that allows for forced evacuations beginning Friday, for the third time in Australia's most populated region this fire season.

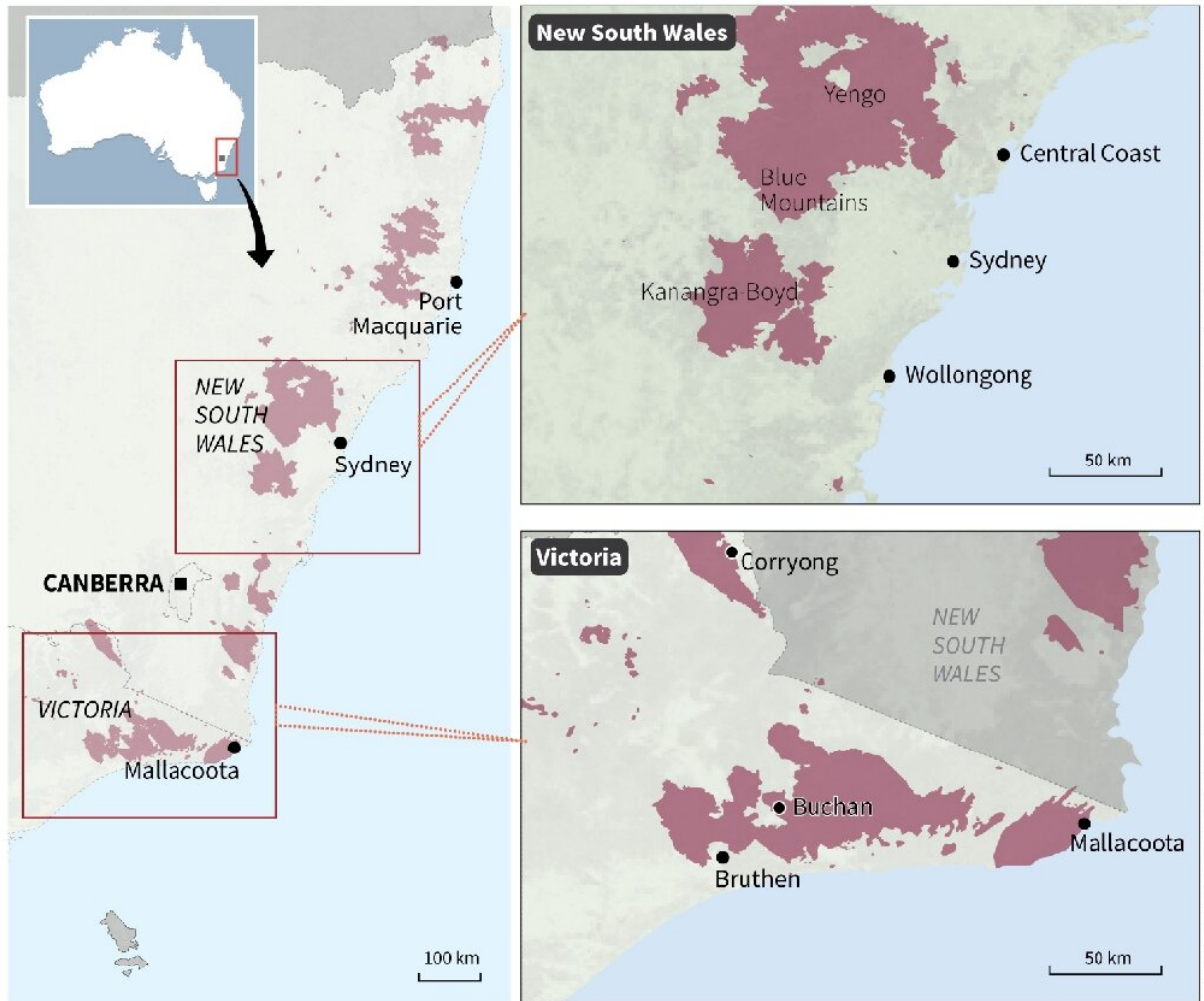
"We don't take these decisions lightly but we also want to make sure we're taking every single precaution to be prepared for what could be a horrible day on Saturday," she said.

It came as the NSW Rural Fire Service declared two "tourist leave zones" stretching almost 300 kilometres (186 miles) from the town of Nowra along the picturesque coast to neighbouring Victoria state, where people are also being urged to flee.

Residents and visitors in two inland areas—which include popular holiday resorts in the Snowy Mountains—were also told to leave, with people given less than 24 hours to evacuate before a heatwave brings gusting winds and temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit).

Australia bushfires

■ Extent on January 2



Source: Vic Govt/ NSW Govt

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Tourists have been urged to flee popular holiday spots at risk from huge fires ripping through the area

That weather will create conditions officials say will be as bad as—if not worse than—Tuesday, the deadliest day in a months-long bushfire crisis.

At least 18 people are now known to have died in one of Australia's most

devastating bushfire seasons yet, and there are growing fears the toll could rise dramatically, with officials in Victoria saying 17 people were missing in the state.

Queue of cars

Many tourists and residents spent two nights isolated with no electricity or telecommunications, before authorities on Thursday declared some roads safe to use.

NSW Transport Minister Andrew Constance called it the "largest evacuation of people out of the region ever", with queues of cars reportedly stretching for kilometres along roads toward Sydney and Canberra as thousands fled.

One driver told AFP it had taken her three hours to travel just 50 kilometres (30 miles).



Catastrophic blazes ripped through swathes of the continent's south-east on New Year's Eve

NSW Rural Fire Service deputy commissioner Rob Rogers said firefighters would be unable to extinguish or even control the raging blazes.

"The message is we've got so much fire in that area, we have no capacity to contain these fires," he told ABC.

"We just need to make sure that people are not in front of them."

John Steele, 73, who lives outside the south coast town of Merimbula, told AFP some people were "panicking" amid the warnings to evacuate.

Steele said he and his wife were staying put for now, but added: "We have our bags packed."

'Weeks' to evacuate

The number of homes confirmed destroyed in recent days has topped 400, with that figure expected to rise as firefighters reach communities still isolated by flames.

Two Navy ships arrived in Mallacoota—where people huddled on the foreshore for hours on New Year's Eve as a fire bore down on the remote town—to begin evacuating up to 4,000 people in an operation officials say could take weeks.



Backburning has been used to try to limit the amount of fuel available to out-of-control blazes

Victoria joint bushfire task force commander Doug Laidlaw said the first evacuees would be moved onto the vessels Friday morning, with children, the sick and elderly taking priority.

"If we need to reset and (return) again, weather permitting, that is exactly what will happen," he said.

Military aircraft have also been working with emergency crews to drop relief supplies into isolated areas and continue assessing the extensive fire damage.

This season's blazes have destroyed more than 1,300 homes and scorched over 5.5 million hectares (13.5 million acres) across the country—an area far greater than Denmark or the Netherlands.

Suburbs of cities like Sydney and Melbourne, home to several million people, have also been hit by bushfires.

The blazes have shrouded Australia's capital, Canberra, in acrid smoke haze that has travelled as far as New Zealand, turning the air over glacier peaks brown.



Firefighters—many of them volunteers—are working around the clock to save people and property

The unprecedented crisis has sparked street protests calling on the government to immediately act on climate change, which scientists say is creating a longer and more intense bushfire season.

Conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison has come under increasing pressure for his actions, which included holidaying in Hawaii as the disaster unfolded and reiterating his support for Australia's lucrative—but heavily polluting—coal mining industry.

In his first official press conference since the latest blazes flared, Morrison said Thursday said "every absolute effort" was being made to

assist affected communities.

"The best way to respond is the way that Australians have always responded to these events and that is to put our confidence in those who are fighting these fires," he said, while defending Australia's climate change policies as "sensible".

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