

Greek villages evacuated as forest fire rages

May 20 2021, by Will Vassilopoulos



Firefighters used helicopters to tackle the blaze threatening villages and monasteries.

More than a dozen Greek villages were evacuated Thursday as firefighters battled the country's first major blaze of the year on a mountain range overlooking the Gulf of Corinth.

No injuries were reported, but "it will be a hard night... we're fighting in difficult conditions," junior civil protection minister Nikos Hardalias said.

People were evacuated before dawn from the first of 17 villages and hamlets affected after the fire broke out on Wednesday evening near Schinos on the Gulf of Corinth, some 90 kilometres (55 miles) west of Athens, a fire service spokesman told AFP.

"Hundreds of people" had been moved out in the action, which also covered two monasteries, Hardalias said, adding that around 20 square kilometres (eight square miles) of pine forest had been razed.

Additional evacuations were ordered on Thursday afternoon after the fire crossed the rugged Mount Gerania and headed for the coastal town of Megara, with authorities contacting residents by text message and with loudhailers.

"We're on a war footing, we're in a state of emergency," mayor Grigoris Stamoulis told the ANA news agency, adding that "when the fire started, we had to keep an eye out because we couldn't rule out the wind bringing the fire front here".

The national observatory in Athens said smoke from the blaze had billowed over the capital and the Cycladic islands as far as Ikaria. The health ministry recommended people limit physical activity and close doors and windows.

Another fire broke out Thursday in Viotia, central Greece.

Forest fire in Greece



Map of Greece locating the area where a forest fire started near the village of Schinos, prompting evacuations.

Difficult terrain

Bleary-eyed villagers said they barely had time to dress as they were brought from nearby communities to the coastal Corinthian Gulf village of Alepochori for safety.

"I was woken up by the sound of the planes. I was startled and my husband told me there was a fire," local resident Irimi Lianou told AFP.

"We had no electricity and we rushed outside. There was panic, with the planes and helicopters, the police and ambulances everywhere," she added.

In the village of Kato Alepochori, police used loudhailers to tell residents to leave.

Fire service chief Stefanos Kolokouris said reinforcements had been rushed in from around the country to contain the blaze, which local officials said had a front 10 kilometres wide.

"It's a large fire in a pine forest (and the) terrain is difficult," Kolokouris told Skai TV.



Smoke has blanketed the Greek capital Athens and reached as far as the island of Ikaria.

"This is a dense forest that had never burned before," Yiorgos Gionis, mayor of the neighbouring resort town of Loutraki, told Alpha TV.

Kolokouris said he believed the fire could be brought under control during the day.

But the winds picked up in the afternoon.

First major fire this year

Many people have summer homes in the area, but lives are not under immediate threat, fire officials said.

However, electricity has been out in the area and it could take 48 hours to restore service, according to state grid technicians on the scene.

"This is the first major fire of 2021... communities have been evacuated as a precaution," fire department spokesman Vassilis Vathrakogiannis had earlier told Skai.

"We have no information (people's lives threatened) and we have not had to rescue anyone," he said.

Over 180 firemen with 62 fire engines in addition to volunteers have been deployed to the area, backed by 17 planes and three helicopters, the fire service tweeted.



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A handful of homes are believed to have been burned, the Loutraki mayor said.

The fire on Wednesday had reached the sea, burning two boats in the coastal village of Mavrolimni, local officials said.

Wildfires pose a challenge for Greece every year during the dry summer season, with strong winds and temperatures frequently exceeding 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit).

In 2018, 102 people died in the coastal resort of Mati, near Athens, in

Greece's worst ever fire disaster.

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