

Villages battle wildfires in Portugal; Europe swelters

July 14 2022, by HELENA ALVES and JOSEPH WILSON



A firefighter washes his eyes with water in the village of Colmeias, near Leiria, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca

More than 3,000 firefighters battled Thursday alongside ordinary

Portuguese citizens desperate to save their homes from several wildfires that raged across the European country, fanned by extreme temperatures and drought conditions linked to climate change.

Central Portugal has been particularly hard hit by a spate of blazes this week. In the village of Bemposta, residents used garden hoses to spray their lawns and roofs in hopes they could save them from the raging wall of red flames that approached through the wooden hills late Wednesday.

"It began spreading towards that way, the wind was blowing that way towards the mountain," said 88-year-old Antonio Carmo Pereira, while pointing to the flames on the outskirts of his village. "In a few minutes I couldn't see anything, just smoke."

"(It's) dangerous, yes. It's surrounding all the houses," he said. "I am afraid, but where can I go? Jump into a water tank? Let me stay here and look."

More than 800 firefighters were still fighting blazes in the Leiria district, where Bemposta is located, on Thursday.

Temperatures in the interior of the Atlantic country were forecast to hit 44 C (111 F) as hot, dry air blown in from Africa lingers over the western edge of the Iberian Peninsula. In June, 96% of Portugal was classified as being in either in "extreme" or "severe" drought.



A forest fire reaches fruit trees in an orchard in the village of Colmeias, near Leiria, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca

The hot air and parched ground, combined with strong winds, has created the perfect cocktail for severe wildfires.

Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa's government on Thursday extended a state of alert for wildfires until Sunday due to high temperatures. The week-long alert was originally to run until Friday. The Portuguese government has temporarily barred public access to forests deemed to be at special risk, banned the use of farm machinery and outlawed fireworks.

Costa said firefighters had to respond to 200 different blazes Wednesday and pleaded for his fellow citizens to take extra care when in the countryside.

"More than ever, we are the ones who must be extremely careful," Costa said. "From a small act of carelessness a great tragedy can be born."

About 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres) have been scorched this week in Portugal, according to the Civil Protection Agency. About 865 people had to evacuate their homes over the past week, although many had returned by Thursday. More than 30 homes and other buildings have been damaged.



A forest fire reaches olive trees in the village of Colmeias, near Leiria, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal

continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca

Civil Protection commander André Fernandes said 160 people, including at least 70 firefighters, have been injured so far, but there are no confirmed fatalities from the fires in Portugal. Four people, including two firefighters, were seriously injured. Portugal has improved its fire safety since wildfires killed more than 100 people in 2017.

The European Union has urged member states to prepare for wildfires this summer as the continent faces another extreme weather shift that scientists say is being triggered by climate change.

In central Hungary, firefighters discovered a body Thursday where a small forest fire had burned overnight. It was found buried under the collapsed roof of a burned farmhouse near the village of Soltszentimre.

Spain was still combating a fire started by a lightning strike on Monday in the west-central Las Hurdes area that has consumed about 3,500 hectares (8,600 acres). Temperatures in many parts of Spain have been topping the 40 C (104 F) mark for several days and are expected to stay high until next week.



Smoke rises from the ground among pine trees burnt in a forest fire hours earlier in the village of Colmeias, near Leiria, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



A firefighter pulls a hose while controlling a forest fire in the village of Colmeias, near Leiria, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



The sun is obscured as smoke darkens the sky in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



A forest fire closes on a house in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



A truck carrying tanks with water drives by a forest fire as smoke darkens the sky in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes.
Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



Men use a garden hose to try to deter a fast approaching forest fire before quickly giving up in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



A forest fire reaches a line of pine trees in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



A forest fire reaches an empty house as smoke darkens the sky in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



A firefighting helicopter flies low through thick smoke from a forest fire in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



A forest fire reaches an empty house as smoke darkens the sky in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



An elderly man uses a garden hose to water the outside of a house as a forest fire smoke darkens the sky in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca



An man uses a garden hose to water the roof of a house as a forest fire smoke darkens the sky in the village of Bemposta, near Ansiao, central Portugal, Wednesday, July 13, 2022. Thousands of firefighters in Portugal continue to battle fires all over the country that forced the evacuation of dozens of people from their homes. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca

In France, two fires raged out of control in the region around Bordeaux in southwest France for a third consecutive day, despite the efforts of 1,000 firefighters and water-dumping planes to contain them.

The fires have destroyed more than 3,850 hectares (9,500 acres) of forest and grassland, the regional emergency said. It said firefighters struggled to contain the fire because of high winds and the difficulty of accessing the heart of the fires. More than 6,000 people have been

evacuated from French campgrounds and villages in recent days.

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Citation: Villages battle wildfires in Portugal; Europe swelters (2022, July 14) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-villages-wildfires-portugal-europe-swelters.html>

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