

New areas under threat as Chile fires rage and mercury rises

February 8 2023, by Pablo Rojas, con Pedro SCHWARZE en Santiago



Some 280,000 hectares have been destroyed.

Forest fires that have killed 26 people and left thousands homeless in south-central Chile in the past week threatened new regions Tuesday as temperatures soared.

Some 5,600 [firefighters](#), the majority of them [volunteers](#), are actively battling 81 priority blazes out of 301 still burning, according to authorities.

As international help in the form of personnel and equipment boosted the teams' efforts, officials declared a red alert in the southern region of Los Rios where fires threatened the Corral and Valdivia municipalities.

Officials also fear fires could break out in the metropolitan region around the capital, Santiago.

After a brief reprieve over the weekend, temperatures soared again Tuesday to create conditions that, combined with the effects of a devastating drought, are conducive to [fire](#) spread.

The mercury in many places was likely to exceed 37 degrees Celsius (98.6 Fahrenheit) until the end of the week, according to forecasts.

"A very complex climate situation can arise," said deputy interior minister Manuel Monsalve, urging teams to be "prepared for any eventuality."

More than 2,100 people have been injured in a week of blazes in the regions of Biobio, La Araucania and Nuble, where a state of emergency is in place.



A state of emergency is in place in three regions of Chile.

Flames have consumed more than 280,000 hectares of land, an area larger than the country of Luxembourg, and razed 1,150 homes, according to the Senapred national emergency response service.

The smoke cloud covering much of Chile as a result has also triggered health warnings.

Fifteen people have been arrested on suspicion of setting some of the fires.

'Intense'

Some 2,200 professional firefighters from the CONAF forest corporation and private companies are being backed in the battle by 3,400 volunteers, and hundreds of experts sent as backup by foreign countries.

France's Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said on Twitter Tuesday the country would send another 80 firefighters and [rescue workers](#) to Chile within hours "to support their counterparts who have been fighting courageously for several days against very intense fires."



The majority of the firefighters battling Chile's blazes are volunteers.

"What moves us to be firefighters is... being of service. No remuneration can ever replace the gratitude of people," volunteer Jose Antonio Sepulveda told AFP.

In Chile, paid, professional firefighters called "brigadistas" concentrate on [forest fires](#) while the rest are all volunteers, including those who fight city blazes.

With permission from his employer, the 26-year-old engineer traveled on his own time and on his own steam from Concepcion, where he lives, to hard-hit Santa Juana more than 50 kilometers (31 miles) away to help battle fires there.

Colleague Macarena Fernandez, a 31-year-old physical education teacher, also from Concepcion, described Friday's situation in Santa Juana as "intense."

"We did what we humanly could, what was within our means," she said.

"The most difficult is to see the situation of people left without homes, without their family, without their animals and completely destitute."



Mexican firefighters have joined the battle in Chile.

Volunteers called back

Another volunteer [firefighter](#), Danilo Figueroa, an electrician of 50, said he and his colleagues are working 18-hour days.

Some have received calls that their own homes had burnt down while they were out trying to save others.

"Even then... they do not stop," he said.

A week into the emergency, the government said some employers were

demanding their staff who [volunteer](#) as firefighters return to work.



The government says companies have started calling back their workers who serve as volunteer firefighters.

"We have learnt that in some places... we have lost many firefighters," for this reason, said Interior Minister Carolina Toha.

"For as long as there are fires threatening lives, (the work absence required) is not too long," she insisted.

"The more days (of fire) the more we need the volunteers, the more tired they are and the more in need of help," said Toha.

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