

Chile forest fire toll rises, hundreds left homeless

February 5 2023, by Javier Torres with Pedro Schwarze in Santiago



Officials say 10 people have been arrested on suspicion of having set some of the fires.

Forest fires have killed 24 people, injured nearly 1,000 and destroyed 800 homes in five days as a blistering heat wave grips south-central

Chile, authorities said Sunday.

Fueled by [strong winds](#) and temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), hundreds of fires have razed some 270,000 hectares in a region about 500 kilometers (310 miles) south of the capital Santiago.

The toll increased by one since Saturday with the death of a person who was being treated for injuries in hospital, said interior ministry official Manuel Monsalve.

The fatalities included one firefighter as well as two crew members of a helicopter that crashed on Friday.

Monsalve also reported 997 people with [fire](#)-related injuries, 26 of them in serious condition.

Eight firefighters are among the injured.

There were scenes of devastation Sunday in areas surrounded by burning forests, with farming plots reduced to ashes, dead animals and [rural people](#) who lost everything overnight.

"It was hell," Maria Ines, a 55-year-old social worker in Santa Juana in the hard-hit Biobio region told AFP after numerous houses were razed by the flames.

"It is a miracle that some of the houses were spared," she said, but "now we are afraid that the fire will return.... Where will we find refuge? Where? How?"



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Miguel Angel Henriquez, a 58-year-old farmer from Santa Juana in the same region, told AFP that he saw a neighbor brave the flames to try and rescue some of his animals. "He did not come out. I yelled at him to come out of the fire, but he didn't listen."

A woman from El Santo, in the municipality of Tome, described that "most of the houses" in her settlement were burnt.

"The people did not manage to save anything, they left with what they wore, because the fire advanced very quickly."

President Gabriel Boric attended the wake of a firefighter in the town of Coronel, telling mourners: "The whole of Chile cries with you. I am here to tell you that you are not alone."

'Small window'

On Sunday morning, a drop in temperature promised some respite for the 5,300 firefighters deployed against the blazes.



Interior Minister Carolina Toha said Chile was becoming one of the countries most vulnerable to fires due to climate change.

"There is a small window of improvement in [climatic conditions](#) on Sunday and Monday," Monsalve told reporters, but warned temperatures could once again approach 40 C by Tuesday.

Ten people have been arrested, the official added, on suspicion of arson.

With some 260 active fires, the government maintained a [state of emergency](#) in the regions of Nuble, Biobio and La Araucania, allowing the deployment of additional resources, restriction of free movement of people and the use of soldiers in containment operations.

"We face the emergency with unity," Boric said on Twitter.

A plane left from Spain Sunday with 50 firefighting specialists, soldiers and drone pilots on board.

"We have just sent a plane to Chile with a contingent of the Emergency Military Unit to help extinguish and control the fires that are plaguing the country. All our support for the Chilean people," tweeted Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez.



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Other countries including Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Mexico have also offered help, according to the Chilean government.

On Saturday, Interior Minister Carolina Toha said Chile was becoming one of the countries most vulnerable to fires due to [climate change](#).

Fire conditions that would have seemed extreme just three years ago are becoming more common, she said.

In 2017, a rash of fires in the same region left 11 people dead, injured nearly 6,000 and destroyed 1,500 homes.

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