

Death toll in Chile forest fires rises to 23: official (Update)

February 4 2023



Raging forest fires light up night skies over Santa Juana, Chile on February 3, 2023; it is one of the cities hardest-hit by a series of fires amid scorching temperatures.

At least 23 people have died in hundreds of forest fires whipped up amid

a blistering heat wave in south central Chile, a senior government official said Saturday night.

"We want to mourn the passing of 23 persons," said Deputy Interior Minister Manuel Monsalve, adding that 979 people have been injured in the fires.

Monsalve said 232 wildfires were still active on Saturday, including 16 that began earlier in the day.

The government of President Gabriel Boric extended a state of disaster to include the southern region of Araucania. The regions of Nuble and Biobio were already under a disaster designation.

The move allows Boric to mobilize the military to help battle the fires as the death toll continued to rise.

Temperatures soared to 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), hindering efforts to contain the fires, many of which raged out of control.

Boric, who suspended a holiday to rush to the city of Concepcion, 510 kilometers (320 miles) south of the capital, Santiago, tweeted that he would keep working "to confront the forest fires and to help families."

Boric said Argentina had offered to send firefighters and equipment.

Brazil, Uruguay, Mexico and Spain have also offered help, Interior Minister Carolina Toha said.

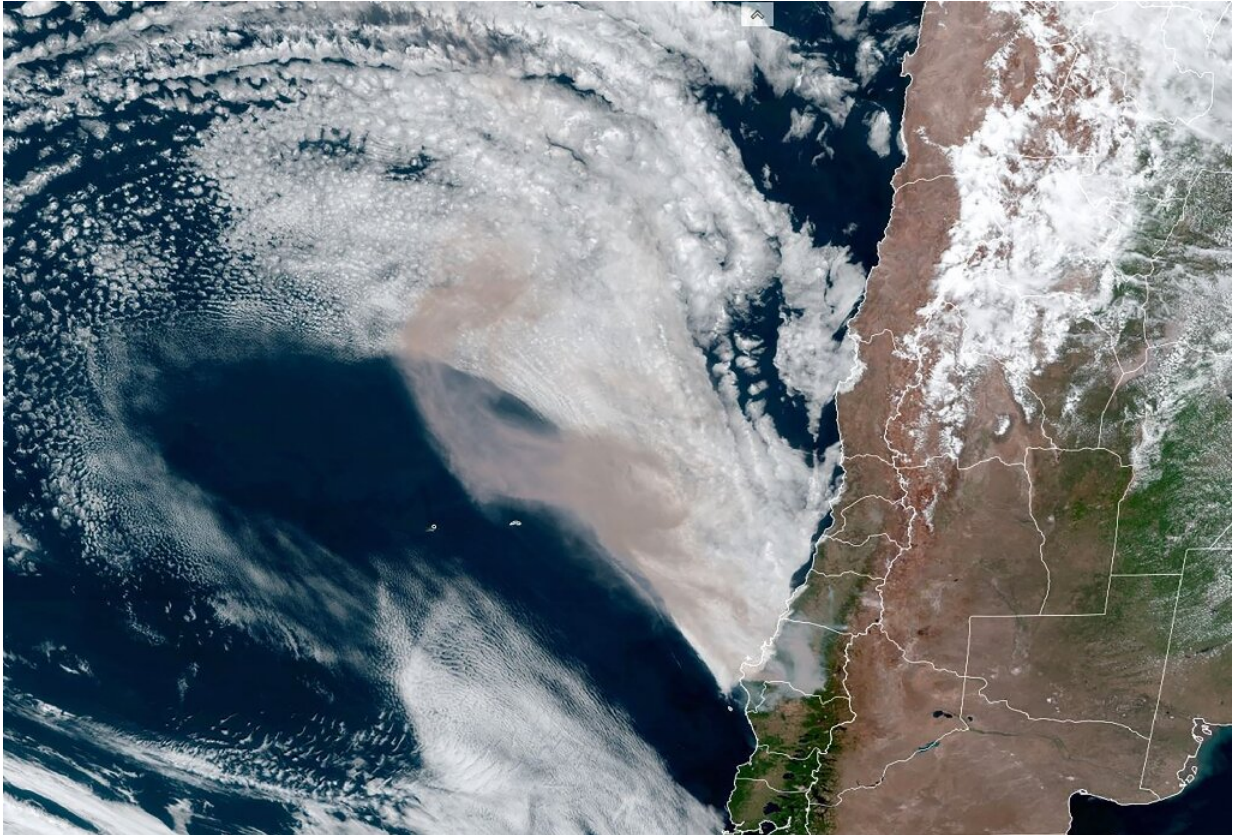


View of a fire in Nacimiento, Concepcion province, Chile on February 4, 2023.

"We are becoming one of the (nations) most vulnerable to fires, fundamentally due to the evolution of climate change," Toha said.

Fire conditions that would have seemed extreme just three years ago are turning more common by the year, she said.

Ten of the deaths were in the town of Santa Juana, in Concepcion province, authorities said earlier.



This satellite image from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/Regional and Mesoscale Meteorology Branch shows smoke (C) rising from fires in southern Chile on February 4, 2023.

The fires destroyed at least 88 homes and swept through 47,000 hectares (116,000 acres) of forest, officials said.

The mayor of Santa Juana, Ana Albornoz, said that the fires had hit hard in the township because "the terrain is very rugged and the roads are bad."

"Our population is very small, with one person living atop one hill and another on another hill, while the urban area is overcrowded," she said.

The dead included two crew members of a helicopter fighting fires who were killed in a crash Friday afternoon, officials said.



A man removes debris from a house in Tome, in southern Chile, on February 4, 2023 after scores of fires raged through the area.

One firefighter has died and at least eight have been injured while battling the blazes.

In all, some 2,300 firefighters and 75 aircraft have been deployed in the region.

The heatwave has created fears of a repeat of 2017, when widespread fires in the same region left 11 people dead and destroyed 1,500 homes.

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