

Algeria battles wildfires that have killed 34

July 25 2023, by AFP correspondent with Abdellah Cheballah in Alger



Fire damage in the Algerian town of Toudja.

Algerian firefighters on Tuesday battled blazes that have killed 34 people across the tinder-dry north, destroyed homes and coastal resorts, and turned vast forest areas into blackened wastelands.

Witnesses described fleeing walls of flames that raged "like a

blowtorch". TV footage showed charred cars, burned-out shops and smoldering fields.

Severe fires have raged through the mountain forests of the Kabylia region on the Mediterranean coast, fanned by winds during blistering [summer heat](#) that peaked at 48 degrees Celsius (118 degrees Fahrenheit) Monday.

The severe heat wave has been reflected across much of southern Europe and northern Africa.

Greece is battling wildfires on three major fronts, and Italy's Civil Protection Department on Tuesday reported "extensive fires" across the south.

Algeria's President Abdelmadjid Tebboune sent his condolences to the families of those killed—among them 10 soldiers trapped by flames at Beni Ksila, in Bejaia province, according to the defense ministry.

"I have nowhere to go now—my house and that of my son have been completely destroyed by flames," said a tearful elderly woman who lost her daughter-in-law and granddaughter. She spoke on TV from Ait Oussalah.

Authorities reported progress in fighting back the almost 100 fires over recent days, having mobilized more than 8,000 civil defense personnel, 500 fire trucks and multiple chartered aircraft.



Fires in northern Algeria.

Out of 97 blazes burning over three days, most had been brought under control but 11 were still raging by Tuesday afternoon, authorities said as temperatures dropped somewhat and winds eased.

The public prosecutor of Bejaia ordered an investigation into the causes of the fires and possible perpetrators.

More than 80 people, 25 of them military personnel, were injured in Bejaia, Radio Soummam reported.

Bouira and Jijel provinces were also hard-hit, but fires burned in a total of 15 provinces, leading to the evacuation of more than 1,500 people.

Climate change and drought

Northern and eastern Algeria battle forest fires every summer, but they

have been exacerbated by this year's Mediterranean heat wave.

Serious fires have also raged in recent days in neighboring Tunisia, especially the northwestern Tabarka region.



Firefighters battle near the town of Melloula in northwestern Tunisia close to the border with Algeria on July 24, 2023.

An AFP team there witnessed significant damage and saw helicopters and Canadair water bombers in action.

More than 300 people were evacuated from the coastal village of Melloula by boat and overland.

Firefighters were still battling flames Tuesday in three areas in the northwest: Bizerte, Siliana and Beja.

In August last year, fires killed 37 people in the northeastern El Tarf region, a year after 90 died, mostly in Kabylia.

To prepare for this year's [fire](#) season, Algerian authorities deployed observation drones and created multiple helicopter landing sites.

The government in May announced the purchase of a large water bomber aircraft and the rental of six others from South America.

Algeria also placed an order with Moscow for four water bombers, but reported that their delivery was delayed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.



Burnt trees near the town of Melloula in northwestern Tunisia.

Local media reflected anger about the latest deadly fires. The TSA news site asked, "in view of all these measures, why couldn't we avoid the disaster?"

Scientists rank the Mediterranean region as a [climate-change](#) "hot spot", with the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warning of more heatwaves, crop failures, droughts, rising seas and influxes of invasive species.

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