

Battle against Greece wildfires 'improving': fire service

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Hundreds of firefighters are battling flames in Greece as a heat wave bakes large parts of the Mediterranean.

The fight against deadly wildfires raging in Greece for more than a week is improving, the fire service said on Friday, warning it remained on

alert as fierce winds were forecast that could rekindle blazes.

"For now we have no spreading fires, the situation is improving, but we remain on a war footing to contain the ongoing fires," a Greek fire service spokeswoman told AFP.

Hundreds of firefighters are battling flames on the islands of Rhodes, Corfu and Evia as well as a new front that broke out in central Greece as a heat wave has baked large parts of the Mediterranean.

Tens of thousands of residents and tourists at the height of the busy travel season have been evacuated, including the popular holiday destination Rhodes, where officials declared a state of emergency this week.

On Friday, the minister for citizen protection, Notis Mitarachi, resigned, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' office announced in a press release.

His resignation was linked to the fact that he has been on vacation in recent days, while the country has been battling wildfires, according to a senior official in the premier's office.

He will be replaced by Yannis Oikonomou, 49, a former government spokesman.

The move comes a month after the country held general elections and the conservative New Democracy party returned to power.

More than 130 people were evacuated by boat from a town in central Greece on Thursday after fires caused an explosion in an ammunition warehouse.

Local media said the blaze had been contained and that residents of the

town of Nea Anchialos had begun returning home, with the force of the explosion shattering windows.

Two pilots died on Tuesday when their water-bombing plane crashed while battling a blaze in Evia, while three more scorched bodies were recovered in fires in Evia and near the industrial zone of the port city of Volos.

For more than 10 days, Greece has sweltered under what some experts say is the longest heat wave recorded in July for decades.

As well as the four deaths, almost 50,000 hectares (123,500 acres) of forest and vegetation have been burned, according to estimates by the Athens Observatory.

Temperatures, which reached 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit) last weekend, have begun to fall.

National weather forecaster EMY predicts they will not climb above 37C on Friday but expects strong winds that could reach 60 kilometers (37 miles) per hour.

Fires have also flared in Croatia, Italy and Portugal this week, and flames killed 34 in Algeria in extreme heat that has left landscapes tinder dry.

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