

Greece struggles to tame wildfires raging for a sixth day

August 24 2023, by Anne-Sophie LABADIE with John HADOULIS in Athens



A dangerous blaze raged on Mount Parnitha near Athens, in the largest forest adjoining the capital, threatening a national park.

Hundreds of firefighters in Greece struggled Thursday to tame deadly

wildfires burning for a sixth day, amid growing outrage over what critics says has been the inadequate government response.

So far, 20 people have been killed in the blazes.

The largest fire front was in northern Greece, where a mega blaze that erupted on Saturday near the port city of Alexandroupoli has now spread over 15 kilometers (nine miles).

On Thursday afternoon there was a major flareup there in Dadia forest, one of the most important areas in Europe for birds of prey.

The Alexandroupoli wildfires are now the largest in the EU on record for 2023 and the second largest since 2000, according to the EU.

'Days of complete collapse'

On Mount Parnitha near Athens, another fire was raging for a second day in the largest forest adjoining the capital, threatening a national park.

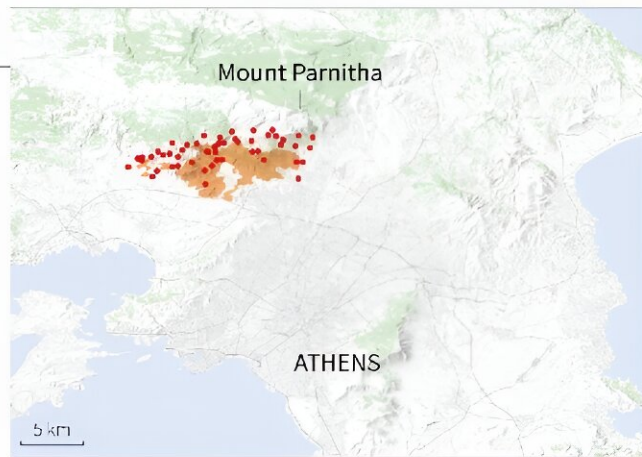
Fire department spokesman Yiannis Artopios told state television ERT there had been an "explosion of fire" in a forest ravine early Thursday that renewed the threat to inhabited areas.

"The biggest fire fronts are being faced in Parnitha where great efforts are being made to contain it," he said.

In the district of Menidi at the foothills of Parnitha, where many have lost homes, there was anger at the perceived failure of the state to protect properties for yet another summer.

Greece continues to battle wildfires

- Active fires from August 23 to 24 (1000 GMT)
- Burnt areas to August 23



Map data: OSM, GFW, NASA
Source: Copernicus-EEF S (Modis)



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Nikos Lazarou, a 32-year-old mechanic, told AFP he was "furious" about fires "breaking out every year."

The same area had also been hit in 2021 by a major wildfire that burned part of a national park.

"The authorities need to take measures," he said.

Opposition also blasted the government for what they said was inadequate preparedness and mismanagement.

"We are experiencing days of complete collapse," Stergios Kalpakis, spokesman for the main opposition Syriza party told local radio Sto Kokkino.

Casualties

Civil Protection Minister Vassilis Kikilias said Thursday that there had been several attempts by arsonists to start new fires on Mount Parnitha since Thursday morning.

"Arsonist scum are setting fires that threaten forests, property and, most of all, human lives," he said in a televised address.



A dangerous blaze raged for a second day on Mount Parnitha near Athens.

"You are committing a crime against the country, you will not get away with it, we will find you, you will be held accountable," Kikilias said.

Police and the intelligence service EYP are investigating the incidents, he added.

Five suspects for arson attacks had been detained on Thursday, said a police official.

"The state really needs to stiffen penalties (for arson)," Nikos Xagoraris, a local deputy mayor, told ERT before breaking down in tears. "This can't go on, the whole country has burned."

The bodies of 19 people believed to be migrants, two of them children, were found in the area this week.

Officials have warned that as the area is a popular entry point for smugglers from neighboring Turkey, more casualties are likely to be found among asylum seekers who could not escape the flames.

A third large fire was in Boeotia, north of Athens, where a 1,000-year-old UNESCO-listed Byzantine monastery, Hosios Loukas, narrowly escaped destruction on Wednesday.

A shepherd lost his life in the fires in Boeotia on Monday.



The fire department said that some 60 firefighters had been hurt in operations.

The greater Athens area—alongside Boeotia and the island of Evia—were the Greek regions most at risk of new fire outbreaks Thursday, the civil protection ministry said.

The hot and dry conditions that increase the fire risk will persist until Friday, according to meteorologists.

Kikilias on Wednesday said the country was going through the worst summer since fire-risk maps were introduced in 2009.

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The fires have burned more than 120,000 hectares of land across Greece in 2023 until Wednesday, according to estimates from the National Observatory.

This year's burned land area is three times larger than the average annually since 2006, according to the European Observatory of Forest Fires.

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