

Over 17,000 hectares destroyed in Colombia forest fires

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Forest fires have destroyed more than 17,000 hectares in Colombia since November, with around 20 blazes still active, authorities say.

Forest fires have destroyed more than 17,000 hectares in Colombia since November, authorities said Friday, as the country faces its hottest

January in decades.

More than 340 fires have been recorded in that period, spurred by prolonged drought, [record heat](#), and the El Niño weather phenomenon, Environment Minister Susana Muhamad said, adding that 26 fires were still blazing.

Colombia has been battling several fires near the capital since Monday, including some in the mountains overlooking Bogota, and authorities have advised residents living close to burnt areas to avoid going outside because of the poor air quality.

"Today, we have a fire in the Nevada del Cocuy," a natural park with snow-capped peaks about 250 kilometers (155 miles) northeast of Bogota, Muhamad told a news conference.

She added that the flames were at a "quite high" point in the park, so a helicopter had been deployed to assess the situation.

Smoke in Bogota

One of the fires is burning about 900 meters from Bogota's eastern El Paraiso neighborhood.

Some residents affected by the smoke were being treated, the Colombian Red Cross in Bogota wrote on social media platform X, alongside photos of emergency workers helping a man wearing a facemask.

President Gustavo Petro this week declared a natural disaster, allowing funds to be diverted from other budget items towards containing the blazes, and appealed for international aid.

Bogota's El Dorado international airport returned to normal operations

on Friday after restrictions the previous day affected 138 flights.

This month is shaping up to be the hottest January in 30 years, according to Ghislaine Echeverry, director of the Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies in Colombia.

Echeverry warned February could see even higher temperatures, and only in March will rains help to "mitigate" the consequences of the extreme heat.

Authorities are investigating whether arsonists are causing some of the fires, and police have arrested 26 people for "fire-related offenses".

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