

Chile mourns 122 killed in wildfire inferno, searches for missing

February 5 2024, by Javier TORRES with Paula BUSTAMANTE in Santiago



Crowded hilltop neighborhoods which overlook the tourist hotspot found themselves without electricity and with limited water, the streets strewn with charred cars, debris and ash.

Chile began two days of national mourning Monday for at least 122

victims of a raging wildfire, as the search continued for the missing and survivors picked through the scorched remains of their lives.

"All of Chile weeps for Valparaiso," President Gabriel Boric said Sunday as the central coastal region reeled from the weekend inferno that has become the world's third-deadliest wildfire this century.

Crowded hilltop neighborhoods that overlook the tourist hotspot found themselves without electricity and with limited water, the streets strewn with charred cars, debris and ash.

"The most important parts of my house were saved, but now we are without electricity, we can't do anything or charge our cell phones. Traffic is complicated with burned cars, everything is devastated," said Patricia Guzman, 63, in the otherwise razed Canal Chacao neighborhood.

Volunteers streamed to the worst-hit areas to help families, rescue pets, and deliver food, water, and tents.

Meanwhile, rescue workers scoured the rubble for further victims.

The state forensic agency on Monday reported the toll stood at 122 dead, with only 32 of the victims identified.

Boric had warned Sunday that the earlier death toll of 112 could rise "significantly."



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Most of the deaths have been in Vina del Mar, a popular tourist spot known for its beaches and botanical gardens.

The town's mayor, Macarena Ripamonti, told reporters on Sunday that "190 people are still missing" in the city.

'It took only 10 minutes'

The fires surged Friday in the region, fueled by winds and amid a brutal heat wave that has seen temperatures of around 40 degrees Celsius (104

degrees Fahrenheit).

Authorities are investigating whether they were started deliberately.

Supported by 31 firefighting helicopters and airplanes, some 1,400 firefighters, 1,300 [military personnel](#) and volunteers are combating the flames.

Authorities on Sunday reported around 40 fires still burning, with evacuations in Til Til, 60 km north of Santiago, and in Galvarino, 400 km south of the capital.

Abraham Mardones, a 24-year-old welder who fled his burning home in Vina del Mar, told AFP he narrowly escaped the fast-paced inferno.



Boric, who met with fire survivors at a Vina del Mar hospital Sunday, has declared a state of emergency, pledging government support to help people get back on their feet.

"We saw the fire on the hill in front of us. We looked out again and the fire was already at the walls of our house. It took only 10 minutes. The entire hill burned," he said.

"The fire consumed everything—memories, comforts, homes. I was left with nothing but my overalls and a pair of sneakers that were given to me as a gift," Mardones told AFP. "I could only rescue my dog."

Upon his return on Sunday, he said he found several neighbors who had died in the flames.

Friends passed by driving a truck "carrying the burned bodies of their brother, their father, their daughter."

Dead victims in the streets

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According to national disaster service SENAPRED, nearly 26,000 hectares (64,000 acres) had been burned across the central and southern regions by Sunday.



Vehicles and homes burn during a fire in Viña del Mar, Chile, on February 2, 2024.



Chile's wildfires of early February 2024 have been the country's deadliest disaster since a 2010 earthquake.

Authorities have imposed a curfew, while thousands in the affected areas were ordered to evacuate their homes.

In the hillsides around Vina del Mar, AFP reporters saw entire blocks of houses that were burned out.

Some of the dead were seen lying on the road, covered by sheets.

According to Interior Minister Carolina Toha, the weekend blazes have been "without a doubt" the deadliest fire event in Chile's history.

"This was an inferno," Rodrigo Pulgar, from the town of El Olivar, told AFP. "I tried to help my neighbor... my house was starting to burn behind us. It was raining ash."

During his Sunday address, Pope Francis, a native of neighboring Argentina, called for prayers for the "dead and wounded in the devastating fires in Chile."

The fires are being driven by a summer heat wave and drought affecting the southern part of South America caused by the El Niño weather phenomenon, as scientists warn that a warming planet has increased the risk of natural disasters such as intense heat and fires.

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