

# Wildfires scorch central Chile, death toll tops 110

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



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

The death toll from central Chile's blazing wildfires climbed to at least 112 people on Sunday, after President Gabriel Boric warned the number

would rise "significantly" as teams search gutted neighborhoods.

Responders continued to battle fires in the coastal tourist region of Valparaiso amid an intense summer heat wave, with temperatures soaring to 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) over the weekend.

Abraham Mardones, a welder who fled his burning home in Vina del Mar, told AFP he narrowly escaped the fast-paced inferno that raged over a hillside Friday and through several blocks of the seaside city.

"We looked out again and the [fire](#) was already on our walls. 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."

The Interior Ministry said late Sunday that the medical examiner's office had received 112 dead victims, 32 of whom have been identified, and that there are 40 fires still active in the country.



President Gabriel Boric has declared a state of emergency as fires rage across parts of central and southern Chile.

Speaking earlier in Quilpue, a devastated hillside community near Vina del Mar, Boric had said the [death toll](#) was 64 but "we know it is going to increase significantly," adding it was the country's deadliest disaster since a 2010 earthquake and tsunami that killed 500 people.

Vina del Mar mayor Macarena Ripamonti told reporters "190 people are still missing" in the city.

"Not a single house was left here," retiree Lilian Rojas, 67, told AFP of her neighborhood near the Vina del Mar botanical garden, which was also destroyed in the flames.



## Dead victims in the streets

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.

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.

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

SENAPRED chief Alvaro Hormazabal, noting the dozens of blazes still burning out of control, said weather "conditions are going to continue to be complicated."

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.

## **'Inferno'**

The fires, raging for days, forced authorities on Friday to close the road linking the Valparaiso region to the capital Santiago, about 1.5 hours away, as a huge mushroom cloud of smoke impaired visibility.

Images posted online from trapped motorists showed mountains in flames at the end of the famous "Route 68" leading to the Pacific coast.



Chilean President Gabriel Boric (C) visits patients affected by the wildfires at a hospital in Vina del Mar on February 4, 2024.





Aerial view of the aftermath of a fire in the hills around Vina del Mar, Chile.

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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