

Athens blaze reignites questions over 'fire every year'

August 14 2024, by Anna Maria Jakubek



Some residents have come home to find their houses devastated.

Climate change may have played a part in the latest massive wildfire just outside Athens, but some critics blame inadequate equipment and lack of planning for what has become an annual crisis.

The wildfire, which started on Sunday in Varnavas, 35 kilometers (22 miles) from the capital, had by Tuesday killed one woman, caused widespread damage and sent thousands fleeing from their homes.

The blaze even came as close as the suburbs of Athens before firefighters got the upper hand.

"People shouldn't be burnt alive in 2024," said Marianna Chatzieftheriou at a small far-left rally on the crisis outside parliament on Tuesday.

For her the death was a "political crime", and one she blamed on the conservative government.

"There are not many firefighters... all the equipment is poor. And the actions start at a late stage," the 27-year-old doctor told AFP.

Fellow protester Marietta Papadopoulou said the water-bombing planes were old models—and there were not enough of them.

"I'm really angry...", the 58-year-old gym teacher told AFP. "The government doesn't take the necessary measures to protect the environment, cities, villages."

Some sections of the press also attacked the response from the authorities.

"Enough is enough" said the front page of Greece's top-selling centrist daily Ta Nea. The liberal Kathimerini said the blaze "had left huge destruction (and) unanswered questions".

"This year too, we are spectators of the same play," said Nikos Androulakis, head of the socialist opposition party PASOK, as he visited

some of the devastated sites on Tuesday.

"We cannot experience such tragic consequences every year. We need to do more and as soon as possible."



Critics say Greece does not have enough waterbombing aircraft: the government says it has ordered more.

'Difficult to contain'

"Every year we are doing our best to improve," said Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who cut short his holiday to deal with the crisis.

"But unfortunately conditions are becoming more difficult," he added after an emergency cabinet meeting Tuesday.

This year's summer wildfire season has seen dozens of blazes, as the Mediterranean country recorded its warmest winter and the hottest June and July since reliable data collection began in 1960.

Scientists say that human-induced fossil fuel emissions are worsening the length, frequency and intensity of heat waves across the world.

Government spokesman Pavlos Marinakis said Greece had successfully dealt with numerous forest fires since May—even though their number was up by half from the same period last year, from over 2,300 to over 3,500.

"The Varnavas fire occurred on a level five extreme risk day... This means that if a fire does occur, it is extremely difficult to contain," he said.

Marinakis said Greece now had "17,500 firefighters—more than ever before".

In April, Greece also unveiled a 2.1-billion-euro upgrade to its civil protection infrastructure, touted as the country's most ambitious to date.

Mostly EU-funded, it includes new water bombing aircraft, helicopters, fire engines, thermal cameras and over 100 surveillance drones.

But none of that will arrive until next year—and the first planes from an order of seven new DHC-515 water bombers will be delivered in 2027.



The fires killed one woman, caused widespread damage and sent thousands fleeing from their homes.

'We know the risks'

Civil Protection Minister Vassilis Kikilias said the original fire Sunday spread even though a water-bombing aircraft reached the area in just five minutes.

"The fire spread very quickly because of the strong wind," firefighter Marinos Peristeropoulos told AFP near one of the hotspots on Monday.

Fellow firefighter Asterios, 45, added, "The [pine trees](#) are like a match. And climate change has brought desert to the woods."

Evangelos Kouris, an electrical engineer from the Athens suburbs, also blamed the rainless, "extremely hot, dry summer".

His T-shirt smudged with soot, he had spent the night from Monday to Tuesday putting out small fires with neighbors.

"The environment is too flammable," the 51-year-old told AFP.

But he also believed "people set fires on purpose" and faulted the authorities for not thinking far enough ahead.

"We know the risks but we are not building a total plan," he said.

"The anger will come later," said another local, Tilemachos Iouliou. For now though, he was "still in shock.

"Athens is on fire every year. The surrounding... mountains are always on fire. But it was the first time the [fire](#) came into the city," the 40-year-old office worker told AFP.

He too blamed a lack of long-term planning, but did not seem confident that much could be done.

"They say you have to build big roads with no trees, but with the kind of winds yesterday, I don't believe they could be of use," he said.

"When there is no more forest, we will be safe."

© 2024 AFP

Citation: Athens blaze reignites questions over 'fire every year' (2024, August 14) retrieved 14 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-athens-blaze-reignites-year.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.