

Athens suburbs on fire as Greece calls on EU for help

August 12 2024, by Anna Maria JAKUBEK with John Hadoulis and Marina Rafenberg in Athens



The Parthenon temple atop the Acropolis hill in a cloud of smoke from a wildfire threatening the Athens suburbs.

A massive wildfire blazed its way into Athens' northeastern suburbs on

Monday as hundreds of firefighters battled to contain it, forcing thousands of residents to flee their homes and sparking a Greek government appeal for international help.

In scenes never before seen in the Greek capital, residents wearing masks against the choking smoke were desperately dousing their homes with water hoses in the leafy suburbs of Nea Penteli and Vrilissia in an effort to render them less vulnerable to fire.

Television footage showed several cars in both areas gutted by fire and the roofs of stately homes burning as water-bombing helicopters roared overhead.

"The situation is dramatic," Penteli mayor Natassa Kosmopoulou told news portal newsit.gr.

"A school and homes are on fire, and I can see the fire coming towards the town hall," she said.

Greece on Monday formally called for EU assistance, a spokesman said.

"The EU civil protection mechanism was activated upon request of the Greek authorities," EU spokesman Balazs Ujvari said in a statement, adding that Italy, France, the Czech Republic and Romania were sending units to help.

French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said Paris was sending 180 firefighters, 55 trucks and a helicopter to assist their hard-pressed Greek colleagues.



Firefighters spray water to try to extinguish a wildfire in Grammatikos region.

Strong winds

The wildfire started on Sunday afternoon in the town of Varnavas, some 35 kilometers (22 miles) northeast of Athens.

Aided by [strong winds](#), it grew to a 30-kilometer long frontline of fires, more than 25 meters (80 feet) high in places, according to state TV ERT.

Nearly 700 firefighters with 190 fire engines and over 30 aircraft sought to contain it, but it scaled Mount Pentelicon, which looms over the Greek capital.

Several large Athens municipalities ordered partial evacuations, including Penteli, Vrilissia and Halandri.

"Because of the direction of the wind we have decided on a precautionary evacuation," Halandri mayor Simos Roussos told ERT. "The fire is very close."

Authorities opened the Olympic stadium in northern Athens and other stadiums to house thousands of people evacuated from the path of the blaze. Three major hospitals have been placed on standby.



Local residents watch a wildfire in Dione outside Athens.

One firefighter suffered serious burns, another was hospitalized with breathing trouble and 13 other people were treated for milder respiratory problems, fire brigade spokesman Vassilis Vathrakogiannis said.

Several smaller communities and towns, including Marathon, which gave the Olympic long distance race its name, started to evacuate on Sunday.

"We are facing a biblical catastrophe," said Marathon's mayor Stergios Tsirkas. "Our whole town is engulfed in flames," he told the Skai television channel.

Smoke drifted through central Athens as thick gray clouds engulfed Mount Pentelikon, which is known for producing the marble used in the Acropolis and other ancient buildings.

"Civil protection forces battled hard throughout the night, but despite superhuman efforts, the fire evolved rapidly," Vathrakogiannis said.

The wind had rekindled the fire in 40 different locations on Monday, he said.



A man gets into his car to escape approaching flames as a wildfire blazes outside Athens.

A children's hospital and a military medical facility in Penteli were evacuated at dawn, Vathrakogiannis said. Another hospital was evacuated during the day.

The destruction revived memories of the Mati disaster, the coastal area near Marathon where 104 people died in July 2018 in a tragedy later blamed on evacuation delays and errors.

The summer wildfire season in Greece this year has seen dozens of daily blazes after the Mediterranean country recorded its warmest winter and the hottest June and July since reliable data collection began in 1960.

Temperatures around Athens were forecast to peak at 39 degrees Celsius (102 degrees Fahrenheit) on Monday, with wind gusts of up to 50 kilometers (31 miles) per hour.

'Engulfed in flames'

"Forest fire near you. Follow the instructions of the authorities," said SMS messages sent to people in the Attica region, indicating in which direction to flee.



Firefighters hosing a wildfire in Dione outside Athens.

Civil Protection Minister Vassilis Kikilias issued a warning Saturday that half the country faced a high risk of fires due to high temperatures, strong winds and drought conditions.

On Monday he said that a fire that broke out on Sunday near the town of Varnavas had spread even though a water-bombing aircraft reached the area within five minutes.

"We're working 24-hour shifts, all of us," said fireman Marinos Peristeropoulos.

"The [fire](#) spread very quickly because of the strong wind," he told AFP near one of the hotspots in Grammatiko.

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

Rising temperatures are leading to longer wildfire seasons and increasing the area burnt in the flames, according to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.



A firefighter coordinates the fight against a wildfire that has forced the evacuation of thousands of people around Athens.

Other parts of Europe are also struggling with high temperatures.

Parts of France rose above 40 Celsius on Sunday. In Rome, temperatures were expected to reach 38 Celsius Monday and remain around 36 Celsius this week.

In the Netherlands, temperatures between 32 and 35 degrees Celsius are expected.

© 2024 AFP

Citation: Athens suburbs on fire as Greece calls on EU for help (2024, August 12) retrieved 14 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-athens-suburbs-greece-eu.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.