

Portugal steps up battle against spreading Algarve wildfire

August 8 2018, by Jerome Pin



The fires have left 32 people injured, one seriously, and forced hundreds from their homes as the flames encircled urban areas in the popular holiday region

Wildfires scorched a path towards more villages in Portugal's southern Algarve region Wednesday as a reprieve from the country's sweltering

heatwave saw firefighters intensify their battle against the blaze menacing one of Europe's top tourist destinations.

Hundreds of firefighters and soldiers have used aircraft to scoop water from the sea at nearby beach resorts in their days-long struggle to douse flames spreading around the mountain spa town of Monchique.

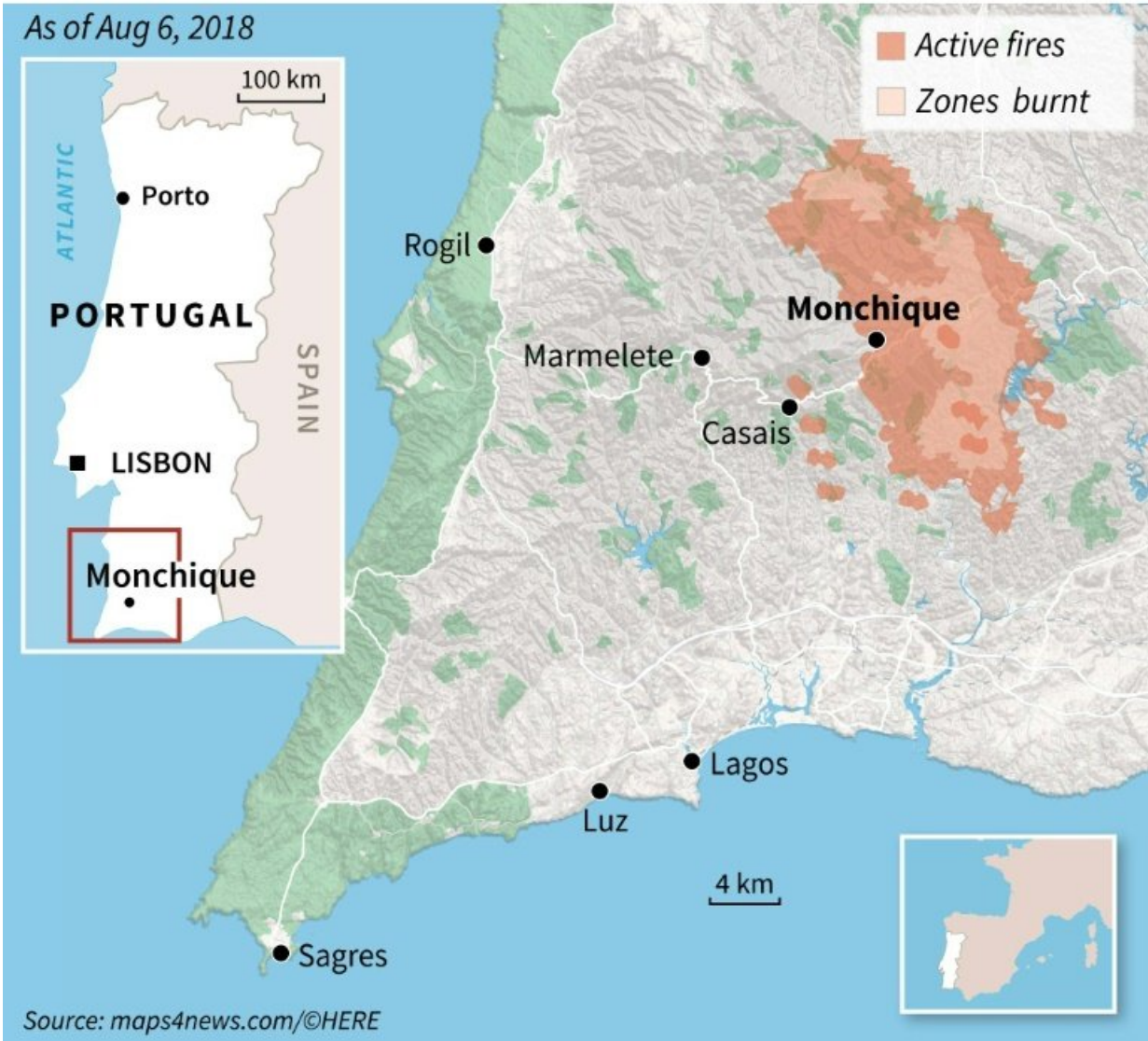
Sweltering temperatures and strong winds kindled blazes that have whipped across the region as the Europe-wide heatwave sent the mercury above 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit) in some areas of Portugal at the weekend.

The fires have left 32 people injured, one seriously, and forced hundreds from their homes as the flames encircled urban areas in the popular holiday region, while British and other tourists were evacuated over the weekend from a luxury hotel in Monchique.

Images released by the European Space Agency appear to show that the fire—which began on Friday in the eucalyptus and pine forests in the hills on Monchique—is visible from the International Space Station.

But with calmer winds, higher air humidity levels and lower temperatures on Wednesday, civil protection service spokeswoman Patricia Gaspar said firefighters had a "window of opportunity" to finally gain control of the blaze.

Fires in Portugal



Map locating fires around Monchique in Portugal.

"We have a more stable situation at the moment and we are doing all we can, with all available means, to dominate this fire as quickly as possible," she told a Lisbon news conference.

Temperatures in Monchique were forecast to reach a high of 24 C.

Fire fears

One front of the blaze was moving steadily towards the town of Silves, which is just 10 kilometres (six miles) inland and there were fears that it could spread towards the coastal city of Portimao, which is popular with British and German tourists.



Hundreds of firefighters and soldiers have used aircraft to scoop water from swimming pools and the sea at nearby beach resorts in their days-long struggle to douse the flames

Ash from the fire had covered cars in the nearby beach resort of Praia da Luz, according to Dutch tourist Maud van Zanten.

The 42-year-old, who is on holiday with her family in the town, told AFP people in the area "were a bit concerned".

Firefighters criticised the lack of coordination, while Prime Minister Antonio Costa was due to visit the firefighter command centre in Lisbon on Wednesday after drawing flak on social media for remaining on holiday as the flames raged.

On Tuesday Costa released pictures of himself on the phone and sitting at a computer in Twitter posts saying he was monitoring events closely, but some critics turned these into memes depicting him playing video games instead.



Firefighters hope they have a chance to get control of the blaze with calmer winds, higher air humidity levels and lower temperatures forecast for Wednesday

Combustible crop

The difficulty in bringing the fires under control has raised doubt on the effectiveness of measures taken by the Portuguese authorities to avoid a repetition of fires that killed at least 114 people last year.

Interior Minister Eduardo Cabrito announced Tuesday that the relief effort would now be coordinated at a "national level" which would "allow greater mobilisation of resources".

The wildfire has charred some 15,000 hectares (76,000 acres) of forest and destroyed several homes.



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Around 250 people were evacuated on Monday evening from villages around Monchique, which is located in the [mountain range](#) of the same name, around 160 kilometres (100 miles) south of Lisbon, but 70 people have since been allowed to return home.

The mountain range has since the 1970s been used to plant eucalyptus trees, a cash crop whose roots dry up underground water. The oils in eucalyptus trees are also highly flammable, which makes the area vulnerable to wildfires.

In 2003 a fire in the same mountain range scorched 41,000 hectares. Another [fire](#) in 2016 that raged for tens days burned 3,745 hectares.

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