Forest fires rage in scorching southwest Europe
13 July 2022, by Bruno Cravo with AFP European bureaus

Southwest Europe endured a sixth day of a summer heatwave on Saturday that has triggered devastating forest fires as parts of the continent braced for new temperature records early next week.

Firefighters in France, Portugal, Spain and Greece battled forest blazes that have ravaged thousands of hectares of land and killed several personnel since the start of the week.

It is the second heatwave engulfing parts of southwest Europe in weeks as scientists blame climate change and predict more frequent and intense episodes of extreme weather.

Firefighters in the coastal town of Arcachon in France's southwestern Gironde region were fighting to control two forest blazes that have devoured more than 10,000 hectares (24,700 acres) since Tuesday.

"It's a Herculean job," said Lieutenant-Colonel Olivier Chavatte from the fire and rescue service, which has 1,200 firefighters and five planes in action.

Further evacuation orders were given on Saturday for a few hundred residents, firefighter spokesman Arnaud Mendousse told AFP.

Since Tuesday, more than 12,000 people in total—residents and tourists combined—have been forced to decamp with five emergency shelters set up in order to receive evacuees.

Meteo France forecast temperatures of up to 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) in the south of France on Saturday, with new heat records expected on Monday.

'Extreme vigilance'

Authorities in the French Alps urged climbers bound for Mont Blanc, Europe's highest mountain, to postpone their trip due to repeated rock falls caused by "exceptional climatic conditions" and "drought".

The call comes after a section of Italy's biggest Alpine glacier gave way at the start of the month, killing 11 people, in a disaster officials blamed on climate change.

In Portugal, the meteorological institute forecast temperatures of up to 42C with no respite before next week.

The civil defence, however, took advantage of a slight drop in temperatures after a July record of 47C on Thursday to try to stamp out one remaining major fire in Portugal's north.

"The risk of fires remains very high," civil defence chief Andre Fernandes warned.

"This is a weekend of extreme vigilance," he added after a week which saw two people killed and more than 60 injured, and up to 15,000 hectares of forest
and brushwood incinerated.

In Spain, the national meteorological agency maintained various levels of alert across the nation, warning of up to 44°C in some regions.

Dozens of forest fires were raging Saturday in different parts of the country from the sweltering south to Galicia in the far northwest, which saw blazes lay waste to some 3,500 hectares, the regional government said.

'So sad'

"So sad to see part of our natural heritage ablaze," tweeted Spain's Economy Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Nadia Calvino.

One blaze in the south caused the authorities to cordon off for more than 12 hours a section of a key highway connecting Madrid to the Portuguese capital Lisbon, before the road reopened.

The fires have scorched thousands of hectares in the Spanish region of Extremadura, while one near the southern city of Malaga forced the preventive evacuation of more than 3,000 people, rescue services said.

In Greece, the civil defence rushed to douse flames raging on the Mediterranean island of Crete, while Morocco was battling a deadly forest fire in its northern mountains.

In the United Kingdom, government ministers were to hold crisis talks after the state meteorological agency issued a first-ever "red" warning for extreme heat, cautioning there is a "risk to life".

The Met Office said in southern England temperatures could exceed 40°C on Monday or Tuesday for the first time, leading some schools to say they will stay closed next week.

Mayor Sadiq Khan advised Londoners to use public transport only if "absolutely necessary". National train operators also warned passengers to avoid travel.

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