

# Athens locals flee as fires rage

*Several thousand residents of Athens' northern suburbs have evacuated their homes as several wildfires continue to blaze around the Greek capital.*

*Almost the entire population of Agios Stefanos, 23km (14 miles) north-east of Athens, fled by vehicle or on foot.*

Multiple fires have been burning across an area some 50km wide, fanned by strong and unpredictable winds.

The fires - the worst since those in 2007 which killed about 70 people - are being called an environmental disaster.

Firefighting efforts were suspended as darkness fell on Sunday, with several major blazes still burning into the night, although no casualties have been reported.

Although the fires had reportedly retreated from the capital's suburbs and were burning mainly forest land, unpredictable winds meant populated areas were still at risk.

"The constant shift in the wind's direction is rekindling the flames," fire brigade spokesman Giannis Kapakis told Reuters news agency. "We must all remain calm through this night."

Dozens of homes were burnt down and a state of emergency was declared in the Athens area.

Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis said the country was facing "a great ordeal" but praised the emergency services for making "a super-human effort". Italy, France and Cyprus have sent aircraft to help the hard-pressed Greek fire crews.

## 'Too late'

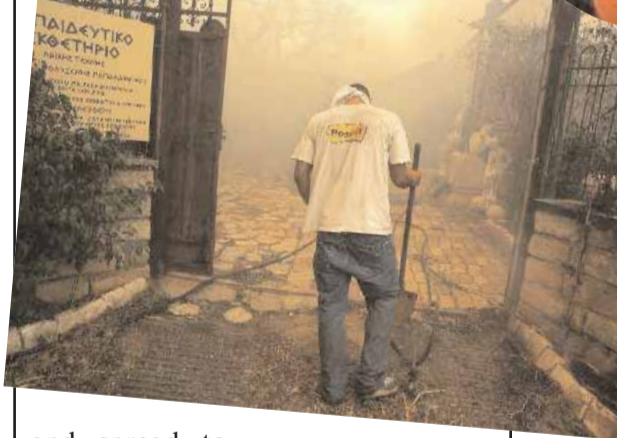
Police with loudspeakers went through Agios Stefanos earlier on Sunday telling residents to head immediately to Athens.

"We had been begging the authorities since early in the morning to send forces," said Panayiotis Bitakos, the area's deputy mayor. "It is too late now. Too late."



The fires are reported to have begun late on Friday near the site of a planned waste disposal facility in Grammatiko, near the ancient town of Marathon.

They spread rapidly across the hills outside Athens, burning through forests, olive groves and encroaching on suburbs. The fires grew larger over Saturday



and spread to Varnavas. By Sunday morning, houses were burning in the Athens suburbs of Drafi, Pikermi and Pallini. Overnight,

## George Papandreou on wildfire situation

Main opposition PASOK leader George Papandreou on Sunday afternoon referred to the major wildfire threatening Athens' northern mountainous suburbs after devastating north-east Attica prefecture.

Papandreou, who spoke from the Palea Penteli township, where he arrived for a first-hand briefing on the situation, said the national catastrophe will concern all citizens, "but in the day after". He also stressed that immediate and

practical steps to restrict and extinguish the fires are now paramount. He also expressed his solidarity to firefighters and the fire-stricken.



fires also crested the top of Pendeli, a hilly, northern suburb with a panoramic view of Athens, setting houses alight. Much of Pendeli mountain was laid waste in 2007, says the BBC's Malcolm Brabant in Athens.

Three of the four mountains surrounding the capital have already been stripped of their trees by previous fires and further erosion of the forest cover would be devastating, our correspondent adds.

## 'Great ordeal'

Hundreds of firefighters and soldiers - backed by helicopters and fixed-wing

aircraft dropping water - battled the fires but they were too numerous and widespread to contain, our correspondent says. A regional

Athens governor, Yiannis Sgouros, told Greek television that more than 30,000 acres of land had been burnt, in what he described as "an ecological disaster".

While many residents of the threatened areas followed instructions to evacuate, others stayed behind to try to defend their homes.

Two children's hospitals, a summer camp and a psychiatric clinic have been evacuated. The fires have left a thick haze of smoke hanging over much of Athens.

Other fires are burning in the central Greek region of Viotia, on the Ionian island of Zakynthos, which has already been hit by fires this summer, and on the Aegean islands of Skyros and Evia.

In July, dozens of fires burnt through thousands of hectares of land in Greece, Spain, France and Italy. According to the conservation group Greenpeace, heat waves and drier conditions are leading to larger and more uncontrollable forest fires across the whole Mediterranean region.

## Greek police ask vacationers to postpone returning to Athens amid wildfires

ATHENS, -- The Greek police authority on Sunday asked people who are returning to Athens from vacations and excursions to postpone their journey in a bid to avoid clogging roads amid the rampant wildfires in the region.

Wildfires broke out late Friday evening in northern part of greater Athens area and fires are still out of control because of the strong wind. It is the most destructive fires in Greece since 2007. A state of emergency was declared in Attica. A police statement said on Sunday that the northern entrance of Athens is not available for the movement of drivers, as it is being used for fire service vehicles. Police urged all the public and private sectors to follow the traffic instructions given by the authority. Continuous instructions will be aired through radio.

## KKE: Organised arson plan

Communist Party of Greece (KKE) Secretary General Aleka Pappariga, referring to the spate of wildfires surrounding northern Athens on Sunday, referred to a well-organised plan aimed at appropriating choice tracts of land in the wider region of eastern Attica prefecture, where most of the wildfires erupted.

Pappariga stressed that, in her opinion, the essence of the problem is that "when there is an organised and well-planned arson plan aimed at the choice tracts of land, and when there is also an enacted framework allowing land speculation, there can be no high-level civil defence plan. I believe that it could exist, one that is better than the one that exists, but we must not ask for an organised plan to be tackled with firefighting means..." An announcement by the Coalition of the Left (Synaspismos) stated that "at this time, the full utilisation of all the means to restrict the conflagration is necessary, before we mourn even worse things." In televised statements, Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) party leader George Karatzaferis said "all of us must assume our responsibilities and first of all the government," adding that "more action and effectiveness is required. Every summer the same and the same. At last, we must tackle the issue at some moment."