

Fires close in on Athens

Tens of thousands of people living in the outer suburbs have been evacuated from their homes and the fires have burnt through more than 30 acres of forest. So far no one has been killed by the blazes.

But an Australian fire expert says this is the second series of extreme fires in Greece in two years and is an indicator of climate change.

Report by Jennifer Macey



JENNIFER MACEY: More than 70 fires continued to blaze into the night in north-eastern Greece as the flames encroached upon Athens.

The fires started late on Friday just outside the capital in the village of Grammatiko near the ancient town of Marathon.

Strong winds caused the fires to quickly spread to neighbouring villages, burning through forests, olive groves and houses.

By Sunday the suburbs on the edge of Athens were aflame. A resident of a nearby village says the fires took them by surprise.

GREEK RESIDENT (translated): By the time we realised what was happening and we could get into the car and leave, the fire had surrounded us. It came from all around and this is what it left behind - catastrophe. As you can see a total catastrophe.

JENNIFER MACEY: Police with loudspeakers drove through Agio Stefanos a suburb 20 kilometres outside Athens urging residents to leave.

Almost the entire population has been evacuated but some ignored the pleas of authorities and stayed behind.

They tried to protect their homes with buckets of water, hoses and even olive tree branches.

AGIOS STEFANOS RESIDENT (translated): Most people left. I just couldn't leave. I did what I could, as much as I could but it turns out you can't fight this fire. It is moving too fast for us.

JENNIFER MACEY: Fire fighting efforts were hampered by gale force winds that changed direction constantly over the weekend. There weren't enough planes or helicopters to water bomb all of the blazes. And the aircraft that was available couldn't fly in the thick smoke or at night.

More than 600 fire fighters struggled to contain the 50-kilometre long fire front. Some residents have complained that the authorities aren't doing enough.

AGIOS STEFANOS RESIDENT (translated): The fire is passed along street and is coming towards us and we

officer Country Fire Service in South Australia was part of that delegation.

ANDREW LAWSON: So there was quite a few villages that we saw that were totally wiped out and it was devastating for the people of Greece.

JENNIFER MACEY: He says Greece and Australia share a lot of similarities.

ANDREW LAWSON: Very similar fuel conditions to us. Indeed they have quite a lot of very similar trees in the eucalyptus type trees and very similar weather conditions.

JENNIFER MACEY: But another fire expert, Professor David Bowman from the University of Tasmania says the conditions in Greece are different to Australia.

He says the scale of these wildfires in Europe serves as a stark warning for Australia's upcoming fire season.

DAVID BOWMAN: I react to those fires with a sense of dread. This is the second extreme fire event around Athens in a few years. Yes, it is a Mediterranean climate and yes, you can have fires in those landscapes but the Australian landscapes are far more flammable.

And these fires do seem to be revealing the fingerprints of climate change - extreme fire weather, sustained extreme fire weather and of course, this is just a run of fires we have seen in the Mediterranean, Canary Islands in the west coast of the United States, in South America.

We have seen a global syndrome emerging of really serious fires.

ELEANOR HALL: Professor David Bowman from the University of Tasmania ending that report by Jennifer Macey.

[ABC Online]

MARINA CHATZISMALI, NEA MAKRI, MONDAY 24 AUGUST

I live in one of the areas where the fires started.

They came within 2km of our house but we have not been forced to evacuate - yet. We're still not sure if we will have to. The situation was a lot worse over the weekend. This area was covered in smoke and there were fires breaking out nearby every five minutes, but there have been airplanes flying overhead dropping water constantly and they have reduced it to smoke for now.

It was very worrying at one stage but we are relieved that it has improved.

However, the winds are still very high so the fires could potentially break out again. There are a lot of ashes blowing around now.

We have been lucky compared to people living about 5km away.

On the other side of the mountain beside us, a whole forest was burnt down and many houses were also destroyed. The nearby town of Aghios Stefanos was completely devastated and many people have lost their homes.

So we are relieved that we have been spared so far and will wait and hope that the fires do not start up again.

have not seen one fire engine. We have had no help at all.

The Greek Interior Minister Prokopis Pavlopoulos says the Government is doing what it can under difficult conditions.

PROKOPIS PAVLOPOULOS: The situation is grave due to the gusty winds blowing in the country and the terrain in the specific region. Securing life and property is the first order of business for fire-fighters and emergency response crews.

JENNIFER MACEY: Greek officials say these are the worst fires since the 2007 wildfires which killed 70 people and left thousands others homeless. But they still don't know if the fires were deliberately lit.

Two years ago, an Australian delegation of fire experts went to Greece to advise fire authorities there.

Andrew Lawson the deputy chief

KATERINA PAPATRYFON DRAKOPOULIS, ATHENS,

The fire spreading, as seen from Marathon beach. Photo: Maria Secova

I recently moved back to Athens from New York. At the moment we are about 10 minutes away from the fires. I have my mother with me. My mother and father live about half a mile away from some of the worst fires. My father and brother are still out there.

The fires are crazy. Just when you think they have been put out, the flames rise again and keep going. I didn't stay in the area. Other people are out there trying to save their homes, quite close to the fires.

People are not leaving their homes. Not out of ignorance of the magnitude of the situation. On the contrary, they are not leaving because there are not enough forces on the ground or in the air to protect their homes. Staying behind trying to save their homes is all they can do.