

Greece faces 'disaster of unprecedented proportions' as wildfires ravage the country

By Chris Liakos, Elinda Labropoulou and Amy Woodyatt, CNN



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Evia, Greece (CNN) Greece is facing a "natural disaster of unprecedented proportions," as 586 wildfires burn in "all corners" of the country, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said in a televised address on Monday.

The Mediterranean nation is broiling under one of its worst heat waves in decades and firefighters continue to [battle blazes](#) across the country.

Sixty-three organized evacuations have taken place in the past few days, Mitsotakis said.

He also apologized "for any weaknesses" on the part of the government in containing the wildfires, which have destroyed hundreds of homes and forced people to evacuate dozens of villages over the past week.

"These last days have been some of the most difficult for our country in decades," he said, citing the extreme heat and months of drought as issues that have complicated firefighting efforts





Photos: In photos: Europe battles wildfires amid scorching heatwaves
A house in Pefkofito, Greece, is destroyed after the forest fire on Saturday, August



Photos: In photos: Europe battles wildfires amid scorching heatwaves
A firefighter washes his face in the Milas area of Mugla, Turkey, on August 7.



EMIS TRECOLO/ANP



VALERIE GROCHE/AP



Environmental authorities have warned that southern Europe, where droughts are becoming more frequent and severe, is at the greatest risk from the impacts of climate change on the continent.

"It is obvious that the climate crisis is affecting the whole planet," Mitsotakis said. "That is the explanation, but not an excuse, or an alibi. We may have done everything that was humanly possible, but in many cases this did not seem to be enough in the unequal battle with nature," he added.

On Monday, a state-of-the-science report from the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded [it is "unequivocal" that humans have caused the climate crisis](#) and confirmed that "widespread and rapid changes" have already occurred, some of them irreversibly.



The world is on the brink of 'catastrophe,' leader of next UN climate talks warns

Scientists are more confident than ever in connecting the dots between the climate crisis and extreme weather: globally, droughts that may have occurred only once every 10 years or so now happen 70% more frequently, according to the report. And amid unrelenting drought and record heat, wildfire seasons are now longer and result in more destructive fires.



Elderly people are seen on chairs and makeshift bed onboard a ferry at the port of the village of Pefki, during a wildfire at Pefki village on Evia.



Firefighter and volunteers use a water hose near a burning blaze trying to extinguish a fire in the village of Glatsona on Evia island, on August 9.

- Mitsotakis said any failures in Greece's firefighting response will be identified, those responsible will be held to account and people whose property was destroyed will be compensated.

The prime minister will chair a cabinet meeting on Tuesday which will announce specific measures to tackle the effects of the wildfires.

‘Apocalyptic’ scenes hit Greece as Athens besieged by fire

The city is surrounded by flames. On the ground, there are tales of heroism – and fear for the future



Locals fleeing with their animals as a wildfire rages in a suburb north of Athens. Photograph: Giorgos Moutafis/Reuters

Helena Smith

Sat 7 Aug 2021 20.00 BST

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Little had prepared any of us on the Athens-bound flight for the sight of the great fire-induced clouds that swept either side of the plane as it made its descent on Friday.

News of the extreme heat engulfing **Greece** had spread beyond its borders all week, packaged in increasingly desperate language. Temperatures were breaking records few had ever imagined. If Monday was bad, then Tuesday was worse. In some parts of the country, the mercury had hit 47C (117F), with thermal cameras on drones recording the ground temperature in downtown Athens at 55C.

By Wednesday, we were hearing that entire tracts of suburban forest on the Greek capital's northern fringes had gone up in flames. Infernos seemingly redolent of Dante's hell had incinerated everything in their path; friends had

lost homes; thousands had been evacuated with residents and tourists fleeing blighted zones by any means possible. Terraces, an Athenian's respite against the blazing heat, had been transformed into ash-laden no-go zones.

"It's been crazy over here. Between the extreme heat and the wildfires, it feels apocalyptic," Eleni Myrivili, a friend recently appointed to the role of Athens' first chief heat officer, wrote in an email on Thursday as the army was deployed to assist firefighters. "Ash is raining down on us here in Athens."

From the sky, it was frighteningly clear that the city was under siege, caught in a cycle of insufferable heat fuelling conflagrations on terrain so parched it was ready to ignite at any moment.

Fires, some big, some small, some extinguished and then rekindled, were raging nationwide, the country's civil protection chief, Nikos Hardalias, told reporters. Conditions were not only "extremely dangerous" but unprecedented, he said, estimating that firefighters trying to protect populated areas, electricity installations and historic sites had battled 154 wildfires over the space of the week. More than 60 conflagrations were still raging on Saturday.



More than 60 conflagrations were still raging on Saturday. Photograph: Joseph Galanakis/Rex/Shutterstock

"Over the past few days, we have been facing a situation without precedent in our country, in the intensity and wide distribution of the wildfires, and the new

outbreaks all over [Greece],” he said. “I want to assure you that all forces available are taking part in the fight.”

Under skies of acrid smoke – so dense, authorities urged residents to wear masks outdoors and close windows in their homes – other nations, including the UK, have stepped up to help this weekend, dispatching water-bombing planes, firefighters and vehicles to Athens.

Although temperatures had dropped after 11 days of exceeding 40C, winds also picked up on Friday, fanning new flashpoints in and around the city.

By Saturday a huge blaze that had burned through forests and houses towards Lake Marathon, the city’s main reservoir, was advancing up the slopes of Mount Parnitha, surrounding a national park regarded as Athens’ last substantial “green lung” and sending yet more choking smoke across the Attica basin.

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)

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‘Greece has burned’: thousands flee Athens suburb as wildfire spreads – video

On Evia, the island east of the capital, where fires have also rampaged from west to north across rugged woodland, dramatic scenes unfolded as ferries, tourist boats and fishermen rushed to evacuate more than 1,000 people from seaside villages and beaches. Men and women could be seen clutching babies and carrying the elderly and vulnerable on chairs as they boarded the ships to safety.



The aftermath of a blaze near Athens. Photograph: Alexander Beltes/EPA

Further south in the Peloponnese, emergency services struggled for a fifth straight day to contain fires that have destroyed large parts of Ilia and Messinia and threatened ancient Olympia, where the Olympic flame is lit every four years.

Mindful of the huge loss of life **from fires that tore through the seaside resort of Mati** in the summer of 2018, the Greek government has prioritised evacuations.

Two deaths linked to the latest fires have so far been reported – one victim was a volunteer firefighter and the other Konstantinos Michalos, the British-educated head of the Athens chamber of commerce and industry, who was found dead after rushing to his factory as a devastating wildfire advanced on Kryoneri, a suburb in north-east Athens.

Greece's prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, said climate change was clearly to blame for temperatures that “have turned the country into a powder keg” and sparked infernos described as the worst in decades in neighbouring Turkey and Italy.



Battling the flames in a suburb of northern Athens yesterday. Photograph: Miloš Bičanski/Getty Images
Athens is the hottest metropolis in mainland Europe, with meteorologists predicting that annual mean temperatures **across the Mediterranean will increase by up to 2C** over the next 30 years.

But in the midst of darkness wrought by nature gone awry, extraordinary stories of valour also emerged last week.

Faced with the prospect of his home in Thrakomakedones in the foothills of Mount Parnitha being razed by fire at 3am on Saturday, Alexandros Rizos decided to stay on and “defend” the property. His wife and child safely evacuated, the 55-year-old business development consultant stood on the roof of the two-storey building, hosing his garden and the tops of pine trees in anticipation of the blaze approaching.

“I am very attached to this house,” said Rizos, an avid marathon runner, recounting the drama, which took place after four sleepless nights. “I hid when the order arrived to evacuate and when the fire came, it came like a typhoon, raining gold everywhere. I was there, alone and very frightened but I had also taken every measure. I had cleared the garden, removed pine cones. The typhoon lasted for about four minutes but the grass outside and the tree tops were wet enough for the fire to pass over.”

The appearance of firefighters minutes later and his own heroic efforts saved the entire neighbourhood from being reduced to cinders.

Like many, Rizos believes the climate emergency will only get worse. “We’re ecologists, we love nature in my family and we want to protect the environment, not install air conditioners that will destroy it. But with temperatures of 45C, that’s going to be hard. We have to adapt. For sure, I’ll be replacing pine trees with other trees that don’t burn so easily.”

Myrivili fears the effects of the destruction of so much forest around Athens. Mount Parnitha is a hub of biodiversity and home to some of Europe’s richest flora and fauna.

“These mountains around Athens are our life support,” she said, describing the challenge to mitigate heat as the battle of all battles now confronting Greece. “We’ve taken a huge step back. A vital part of our green infrastructure has gone. With all these trees no longer there, we’ll be faced with new climate conditions and have higher temperatures and likely floods in the metropolitan area of Athens for years to come.”

Blaze ravages Evia island on sixth day of Greek wildfires

Marco Trujillo

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3 minute read



A wildfire burns in the village of Vasilika, on Evia island, Greece, August 7, 2021. Picture taken August 7, 2021. REUTERS/Alexandros Avramidis

PSAROPOULI, Greece, Aug 8 (Reuters) - Thousands of people have fled their homes on the Greek island of Evia as wildfires burned uncontrolled for a sixth day on Sunday, and ferries were on standby for more evacuations after taking many to safety by sea.

Fires that had threatened northern suburbs of Athens in recent days died back somewhat. But the blaze on Evia, a large island east of the capital, quickly burgeoned into

several fronts, ripping through thousands of hectares (acres) of pristine forest across its northern part, and forcing the evacuation of dozens of villages.

"I feel angry. I lost my home... nothing will be the same the next day," said one resident who gave her name as Vasilikia after boarding a rescue ferry at the village of Psaropouli.

"It's a disaster. It's huge. Our villages are destroyed, there is nothing left from our homes, our properties, nothing, nothing," she said.

Wildfires have erupted in many parts of the country during a weeklong heatwave, Greece's worst in three decades, with searing temperatures and hot winds creating tinderbox conditions. Across the country, forest land has burned and dozens of homes and businesses have been destroyed.

Greece has deployed the army to help battle the fires and several countries including France, Egypt, Switzerland and Spain have also sent help including firefighting aircraft.

More than 570 firefighters are battling the blaze in Evia, authorities said.

The coastguard has evacuated more than 2,000 people, including many elderly residents, from different parts of the island since Tuesday, in dramatic sea rescues as the night sky turned red from the flames.

The governor for central Greece, Fanis Spanos, said the situation in the north of the island had been "very difficult" for nearly a week.

"The fronts are huge, the area of burned land is huge," he told Skai TV. More than 2,500 people have been accommodated in hotels and other shelters, he said.

A fire on the foothills of Mount Parnitha north of Athens has been contained but weather conditions meant there was still a high threat it could flare again.

On Friday night, strong winds pushed the fire into the town of Thrakomakedones, where residents had been ordered to evacuate. The blaze left burnt and blackened houses and cars among scorched pine trees.

Greek wildfires a major ecological catastrophe, PM says

By ELENA BECATOROS
today



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A burnt forest in Agia Anna village on Evia island, about 181 kilometers (113 miles) north of Athens, Greece, Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021. Hundreds of firefighters from across Europe and the Middle East worked alongside Greek colleagues in rugged terrain Wednesday to contain flareups of the huge wildfires that ravaged Greece's forests for a week, destroying homes and forcing evacuations. (AP Photo/Michael Varaklas)

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on Thursday described the devastating wildfires that burned across the country for more than a week as the greatest ecological catastrophe Greece had seen in decades.

The fires broke out as the country roasted during the most intense and protracted heat wave experienced since 1987. Hundreds of wildfires erupted across the country, stretching Greece's firefighting capabilities to the limit and leading the government to appeal for help from abroad. Hundreds of firefighters, along with planes, helicopters and vehicles, arrived from 24 European and Middle Eastern countries to assist.

"We managed to save lives, but we lost forests and property," Mitsotakis said, describing the wildfires as "the greatest ecological catastrophe of the last few decades."

Speaking during a news conference in Athens, his first since the fires broke out, Mitsotakis said authorities had faced around 100 active blazes each day. By Thursday, the situation was much improved, with most large wildfires on the wane.

But the prime minister warned the danger of more blazes was still present.

"We are in the middle of August and it's clear we will have difficult days ahead of us" until the main season during which fires break out is over, he said.

"The climate crisis — I'd like to use this term, and not climate change — the climate crisis is here, and it shows us everything needs to change" he said, adding he was ready to make the "bold changes" needed.

"This is a common crisis for all of us," he said.

Several Mediterranean countries have suffered [intense heat](#) and quickly spreading wildfires in recent weeks, including Turkey, where at least eight people have died, and Italy. In Algeria, [wildfires in the mountains have killed at least 69 people](#).

Worsening drought and heat — both linked to climate change — have also fueled wildfires this summer in the Western United States and [in Russia's northern Siberia](#) region. Scientists say there is little doubt that climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving more extreme events.

Greece's largest fire broke out on the country's second-largest island of Evia on Aug. 3 and was still smoldering on Thursday, after having destroyed most of the island's north.

More than 50,900 hectares were damaged in northern Evia, according to mapping from the European Union's Copernicus Emergency Management Service. Entire mountains of mainly pine forest have been reduced to wastelands of blackened stumps, while olive and fig tree plantations and vineyards were also destroyed.

More than 850 firefighters, including hundreds from the Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Poland and Moldova, were continuing efforts to prevent flare-ups in the area, assisted by nine helicopters and eight aircraft, including two massive Ilyushin 11-76 water-dropping planes sent by Russia.

Two major fires were also still burning in the southern Greek region of the Peloponnese, while the fire department said Thursday evening that 106 blazes had broken out across Greece in the previous 24 hours.

The government prioritized protecting lives in its fire response, issuing dozens of evacuation orders for villages in the path of the flames. In that respect, the policy appears to have worked. One volunteer firefighter died while working in an area north of Athens hit by a major fire, after being hit by a falling electricity pole. Four volunteer firefighters have been hospitalized with burns, including two in critical condition in intensive care.

Greek authorities had been anxious to avoid a repetition of the summer of 2018, when a fast-moving wildfire engulfed a seaside settlement near Athens, killing more than 100 people, including some who drowned trying to escape by sea.

But the current tactic of evacuation orders has come under criticism by many residents and local officials in areas affected by this year's fires, who have argued the orders were premature. They point to those who ignored the evacuation messages, staying behind to fight the flames and managing to save their homes.

“We managed to protect thousands of people. But we lost forests and property,” Mitsotakis said during his press conference. “And we are here to talk about everything ... (including) where nature found us unprepared.”

The government has also come under criticism for not deploying enough firefighting planes and helicopters, and not sending them soon enough, particularly to Evia. Authorities have countered that the aircraft were flying wherever possible, but that the entire firefighting fleet cannot be airborne at the same time, as some need to land for essential servicing.

Asked about the cause of the fires, and whether an organized campaign of arson was suspected, Mitsotakis said it was “certain that some of the fires in the last few days were the result of arson.” Several people have been arrested over the past few days on suspicion of attempting to start fires, including some who are accused of doing so deliberately.

However, he added it was unclear whether this was a result of an organized plan, and noted that the hot, dry conditions had aided the spread of wildfires.