

Canada wildfires: At least 30,000 households in British Columbia told to evacuate

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By Jaroslav Lukiv & Aoife Walsh

BBC News

About 30,000 households have been ordered to evacuate in Canada's British Columbia province, where nearly 400 wildfires are raging.

Two huge fires in the Shuswap region merged overnight, destroying blocks of houses and other buildings.

To the south, travel to the waterside city of Kelowna has been restricted, and smoke from nearby fires hangs over Lake Okanagan.

Fires have charred homes in West Kelowna, a nearby city of 36,000.

The travel restriction around Kelowna is designed to ensure enough accommodation for evacuees and emergency workers. It also applies to the towns of Kamloops, Oliver, Penticton and Vernon and Osoyoos.

Hundreds of miles north, a huge fire continues to edge towards the city of Yellowknife.

An official deadline to evacuate the city - the capital of Canada's Northwest Territories - lapsed on Friday. A local official said later that day that nearly all residents had left, either by car or plane.

About 19,000 of the city's 20,000 inhabitants had evacuated. Authorities said 39 patients were moved out of a hospital to alternative facilities on Friday evening, making them the last people to be evacuated from the city.

Environment and communities minister Shane Thompson said some people had chosen "to shelter in place", but urged locals to leave.

- **The numbers behind Canada's worst wildfires season**
- **'Apocalyptic' scenes as Canadians flee wildfires**

In British Columbia, evacuation orders grew from covering 15,000 homes on Friday to at least 30,000 by Saturday evening. Another 36,000 homes are under evacuation alert. The province's emergency management minister said officials "cannot stress strongly enough how critical it is to follow evacuation orders".

Bowinn Ma added: "They are a matter of life and death not only for the people in those properties, but also for the first responders who will often go back to try to implore people to leave."

Premier of the province, David Eby, put the total number of people ordered to leave at 35,000, with 30,000 told to be prepared to evacuate.



One Kelowna resident told the BBC the fires came over the mountainside like an "ominous cloud of destruction"



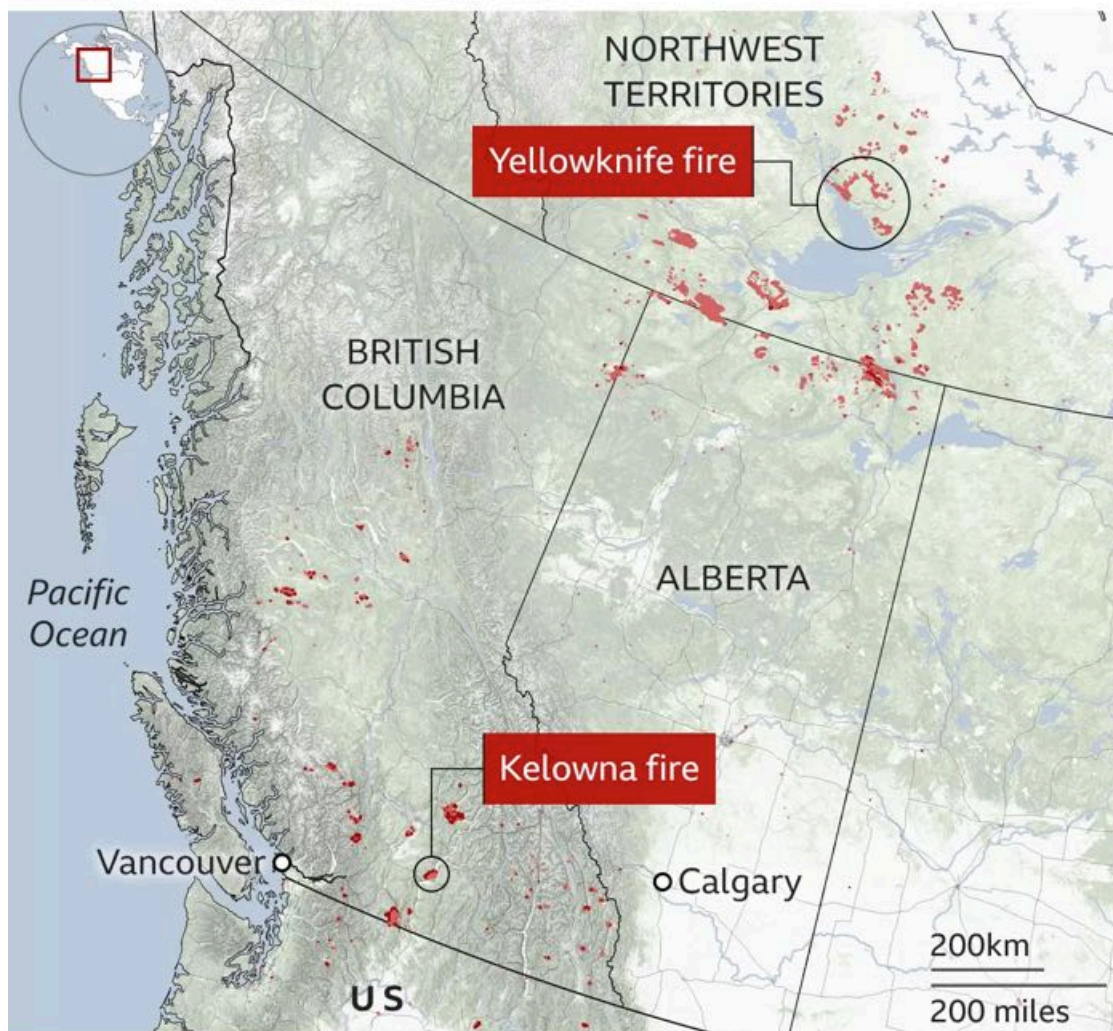
Smoke from wildfires is hanging over Lake Okanagan, on which Kelowna sits
Canada is having its worst wildfire season on record, with at least 1,000 fires burning across the country, according to the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC).

Experts say climate change increases the risk of the hot, dry weather that is likely to fuel wildfires.

Extreme and long-lasting heat draws more and more moisture out of the ground - which can provide fuel for fires that can spread at an incredible speed, particularly if winds are strong. Although no deaths have been reported in the latest fires, at least four firefighters have lost their lives during this record-breaking season.

Wildfires active in western Canada

In past: ● 24 hours ● Seven days

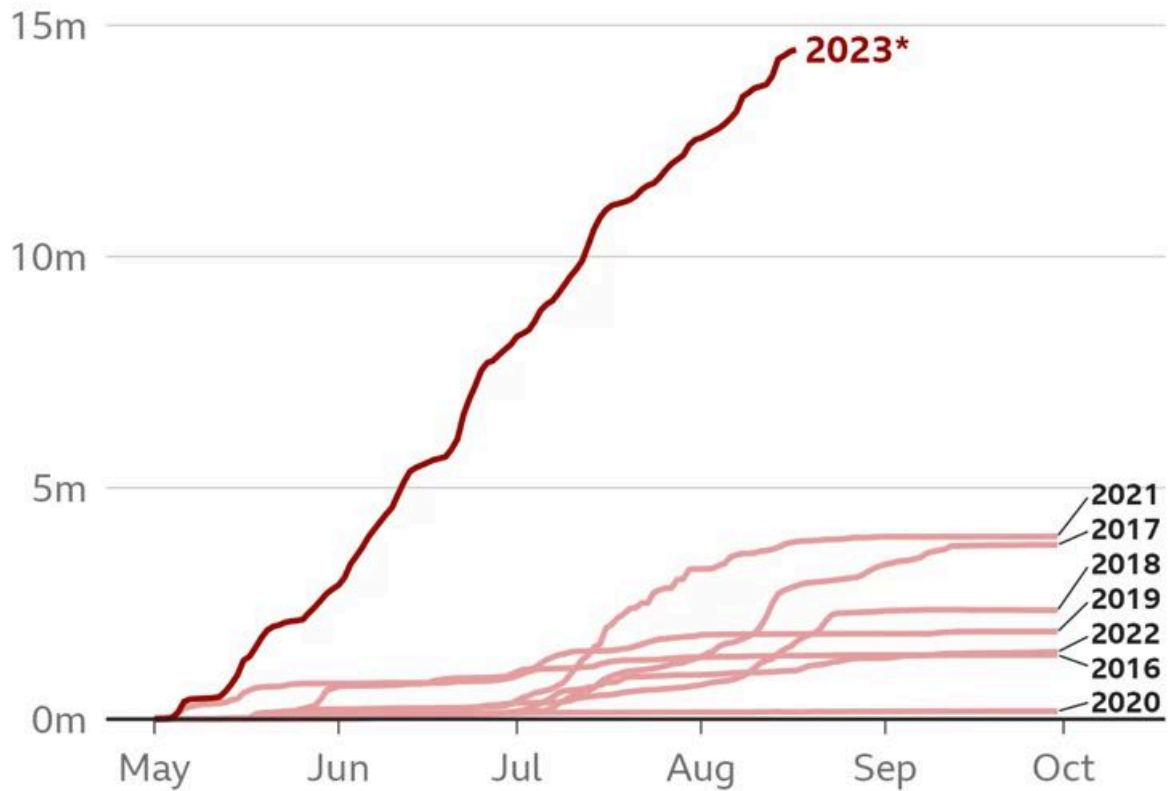


Source: Nasa FIRMS data, 15:00 GMT 20 August

BBC

Canada wildfires are worse than recent years

Estimated cumulative area burned during fire season (hectares)



*Data for 2023 is up to 18 August

Source: Canadian Wildland Fire Information System/CBC



Canada wildfire: all 20,000 Yellowknife residents evacuating

By David Ljunggren

August 18, 2023 6:24 PM GMT+12 Updated 2 days ago



Smoke rises during the wildfire in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada August 17, 2023, in this screen grab obtained from a social media video. Bonita Kay Summers/via



Aug 17 (Reuters) - Canadian fire crews on Thursday battled to prevent wildfires from reaching the northern city of Yellowknife,

where all 20,000 residents are leaving by car and plane after an evacuation order was declared.

Water bombers flew low over Yellowknife as thick smoke blanketed the capital of the vast and sparsely populated Northwest Territories. Officials say the fire, which is moving slowly, is now 15 km (10 miles) northwest of the city and could reach the outskirts by Saturday if there is no rain.

"Very tough days ahead – with two days of northwest to west-northwest winds on Friday and Saturday, which would push fire towards Yellowknife," the territorial fire service said in a statement on Facebook.

In the Pacific province of British Columbia, which has suffered unusually intense blazes this year, officials warned residents to prepare for extreme fire conditions.

"This weather event has the potential to be the most challenging 24 to 48 hours of the summer from a fire perspective," wildfire service director Cliff Chapman told reporters. "We are expecting significant growth and we are expecting our resources to be challenged from north to south."

In Yellowknife, hundreds of people lined up outside a local high school waiting to be taken to the airport for one of the five evacuation flights planned on Thursday to the neighboring province of Alberta.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau convened a meeting of the Incident Response Group to discuss the fires on Thursday. The group is comprised of senior officials and ministers, and meets in cases of crisis.

Defence Minister Bill Blair, speaking to the Canadian Broadcasting Corp (CBC) after the meeting, said the federal government was closely monitoring the evacuations and was prepared to quickly airlift residents if land routes get cut off.

This is Canada's worst-ever wildfire season with more than 1,000 active fires burning across the country, including 265 in the Northwest Territories. Experts say climate change has exacerbated the wildfire problem.

Drought has been a contributing factor to the number and intensity of this year's fires, officials say, with high temperatures exacerbating the situation. Much of Canada has seen abnormally dry conditions.

Shane Thompson, the territorial environment minister, said the evacuation order had been issued late Wednesday to give people time to get out before the weather turned bad.

"The urgency is, fire changes drastically ... the conditions are in our favor right now, but that will change on Saturday," he told the CBC.

In total, about 65% of the Territories population of 46,000 people would be evacuated, he said.

The Northwest Territories have limited infrastructure and there is only one two-lane road out of Yellowknife to the province of Alberta to the south.

Alberta has set up three official evacuee reception centers for those leaving by road but the closest is more than 1,100 km (680 miles) from Yellowknife.

The deadline for residents to leave Yellowknife is noon on Friday (1800 GMT).

Yellowknife Mayor Rebecca Alty said special teams were clear-cutting trees close to the city in an effort to prevent flames from spreading. They also planned to use fire retardant while ensuring sprinkler systems are working, she told the CBC.

Canada's two largest airlines said they were adding flights from Yellowknife and capping fares following outrage on social media about some soaring prices.

Some of the evacuees will be flown to Calgary, in Alberta. Iain Bushell, Calgary's emergency management director, said the city could accommodate and feed 5,000 people.

"We are prepared to house them and help them for as long as they need," he told a televised briefing.

In a social media post, the Northwest Territories fire service said a fire that had been threatening Hay River, a community of some 3,000 further south on Great Slave Lake, had stalled overnight.

So far about 134,000 square km (52,000 square miles) of land in Canada have been scorched, more than six times a 10-year average. Nearly 200,000 people have been forced to evacuate at some point this season.

"The territories have never seen anything like this before in terms of wildfire ... it's an unimaginable situation for so many," Mike Westwick, the territories' fire information officer, told the CBC.

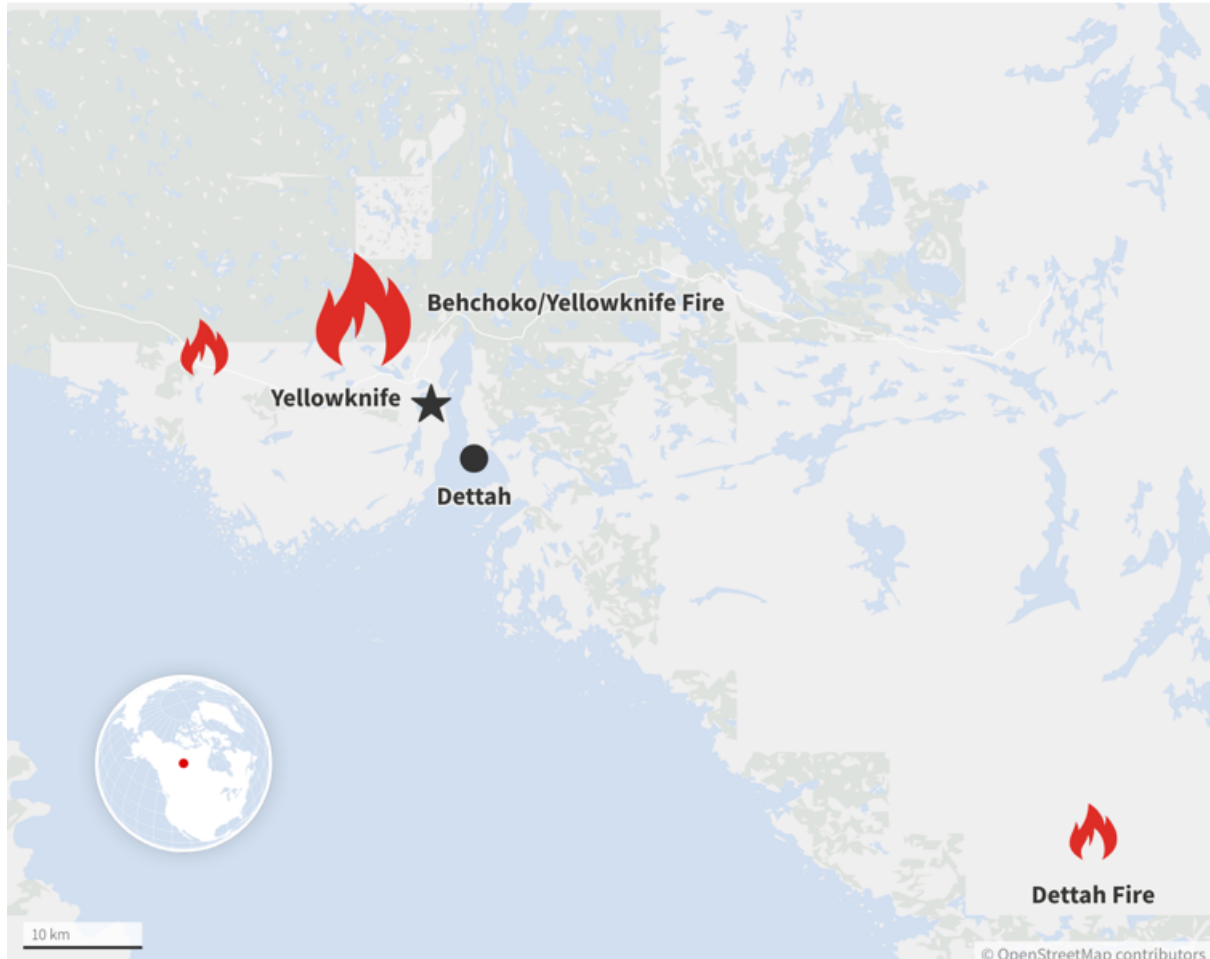
The blazes have also affected industrial and energy production. Diamond producer De Beers said in a statement that its Gahcho Kue mine, some 280 km (170 miles) northeast of Yellowknife, continued to operate although a number of employees from surrounding communities had been evacuated.

In May 2016, a huge fire destroyed 10% of structures in the northern energy-producing Alberta city of Fort McMurray, forcing the evacuation of 90,000 residents and shutting in more than a million barrels per day of oil output.

In June 2021, 90% of the structures in the British Columbia village of Lytton burned down, a day after it recorded Canada's hottest-ever temperature.

Canada wildfire forces 20,000 Yellowknife residents to evacuate

The 163,000-hectare wildfire is currently 15 kilometers from Yellowknife and could reach the outskirts of the city by Saturday if there is no rain. Canada is enduring its worst-ever wildfire season with more than 1,000 active fires burning across the country, including 265 in the Northwest Territories.



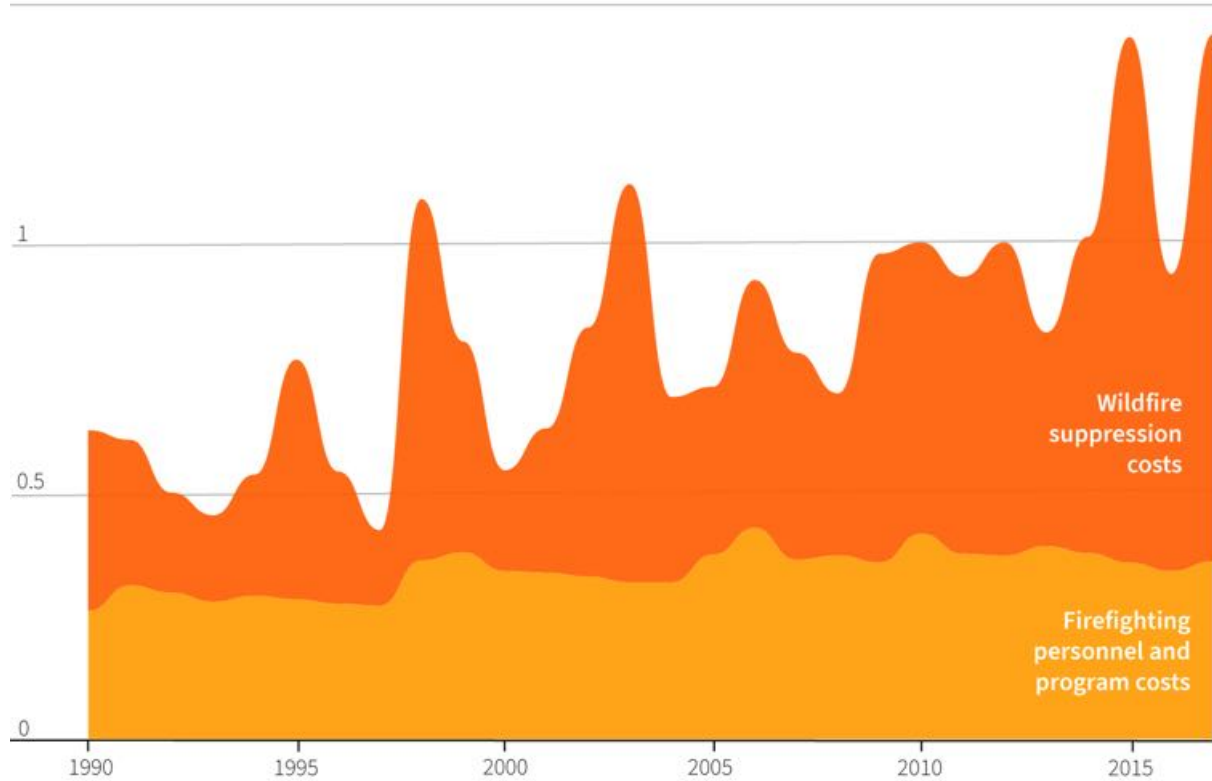
Source: Environment and Climate Change, NWT

Reuters Graphics

Fighting wildfires is getting costly for Canada

Since 2009, Canada has been spending more on fighting and suppressing wildfires than on maintaining its firefighting personnel and program.

CA\$1.5 billion



Note: Costs are adjusted to 2017 Canadian dollars.

Source: Government of Canada

Prinz Magtulis | Reuters, June 8, 2023

Since 2009, Canada has been spending more on fighting and suppressing wildfires than on maintaining its firefighting personnel and program.

Additional reporting by Ismail Shakil in Ottawa, Divya Rajagopal in Toronto and Allison Lampert in Montreal; Editing by Devika Syamnath, David Gregorio, Josie Kao and Jonathan Oatis

British Columbia wildfires intensify, doubling evacuations to over 35,000

By Chris Helgren and Nia Williams

August 20, 2023 10:28 AM GMT+12 Updated 2 hours ago



The McDougall Creek wildfire burns next to houses in the Okanagan community of West Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada, August 19, 2023. REUTERS/Chris Helgren

KELOWNA, British Columbia, Aug 19 (Reuters) - Forest fires in Canada's western province of British Columbia intensified further on Saturday, doubling the number of people under an evacuation order to

35,000 from a day earlier, as authorities warned of difficult days ahead.

The province declared a state of emergency on Friday, to access temporary authoritative powers to tackle fire-related risks, as out-of-control fires ripped through interior British Columbia and partially shut down some sections of a key transit route between the Pacific coast and the rest of western Canada, and destroyed many properties.

"The current situation is grim," Premier Daniel Eby told reporters on Saturday, saying some 35,000 people are under an evacuation order, and a further 30,000 were under evacuation alert.

Eby said the province is in dire need of shelter for evacuees and firefighters and ordered a ban on non-essential travel to make more temporary accommodation available.

B.C. had experienced strong winds and dry lightning in the past few days due to a cold mass of air interacting with hot air built-up in the sultry summer. That intensified existing forest fires and ignited new ones.

"We are still in some critically dry conditions, and are still expecting difficult days ahead," said Jerrad Schroeder, deputy fire centre manager at the Kamloops Fire Centre.

By Friday, an out-of-control fire in southern B.C. grew more than a hundredfold in 24 hours and forced more than 2,400 properties to be evacuated. The fire was centered around Kelowna, a city some 300 kilometres (180 miles) east of Vancouver, with a population of about 150,000.

The fires moved so rapidly on Friday that the number of people under evacuation order grew from 4,500 to 15,000 in an hour, while another 20,000 were under evacuation alert. The province currently accounts for over a third of Canada's 1,062 active fires.

The flames have already destroyed several structures in West Kelowna and authorities have been warning that the province could potentially face the worst couple of days of the fire season this year.

MAIN EAST-WEST ARTERY UNDER THREAT

The TransCanada highway was closed near Chase, around 400 km northeast of Vancouver, and between Hope, 150 km east of Vancouver, and the village of Lytton.

TransCanada is the main east-west artery used by thousands of motorists and road freight heading to Port of Vancouver, the country's busiest.

Some 5,000 customers are also without electricity in interior B.C. due to the fires, the main utility said.

Forest fires are not uncommon in Canada, but the spread of blazes and disruption underscore the severity of its worst wildfire season yet.

The fires have drained local resources and drawn in federal government assistance as well as support from 13 countries. At least four firefighters have died in the line of duty.

About 140,000 square km (54,054 square miles) of land, roughly the size of New York state, have already burned, and government officials

project the fire season could stretch into autumn due to widespread drought-like conditions in Canada.

The escalation in B.C. comes as the northern Canadian city of Yellowknife evacuated most of its roughly 20,000 residents due to a large approaching blaze.

People left their homes and property behind on Thursday and Friday to seek refuge in neighbouring provinces due to the threat of the creeping fire cutting off land exits and potentially doing worse harm.

Residents and tourists drove away on roads flanked by fire and smoke, while local and federal authorities flew out some others.

The massive blaze threatening Yellowknife, the Northwest Territories' capital city, made little headway on Friday as firefighters held it back.

But strong winds could still blow the blaze toward the city, and it could reach the outskirts this weekend, the territory's fire service has cautioned.

Reporting by Ismail Shakil in Ottawa, writing by Denny Thomas, Editing by Kim Coghill, Josie Kao and Deepa Babington