



A man leads his animals away from an advancing fire raging through Cokertme village near Bodrum

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Turkey's worst wildfires this century

Turkey has been experiencing weather extremes this year. Substantial parts of the country became enveloped in thick acrid smoke as fires broke out in forests along the Mediterranean and Aegean coasts. At the time of writing there had been 240 wildfires of which five were still burning, says **Tony Moore**

The fires were fuelled by a heatwave stretching across southern Europe, fed by hot air from North Africa, although there was a short respite during the night of August 6 when rain fell for a short time. In addition to the forests, the cities of Antalya, Muğla, Mersin, Adana and Osmaniye were principally affected. Huge swathes of forest were burned to the ground, settlements destroyed, thousands of people evacuated and eight people died. Eight further deaths were recorded after Russian and Turkish crew

members and emergency workers were killed when their firefighting plane crashed in Adana province. At one stage, the fires came within one kilometre of Kemerköy Thermal Power Plant in the district of Türkevşeri, from where staff had been evacuated along with people living in the vicinity.

At least 18 villages in Antalya Province and 16 in the neighbouring provinces of Adana and Mersin were officially evacuated. In some cases, villagers refused to leave,

preferring to stay and trying to save their homes. Farmers were equally desperate in their attempts to save their flocks of animals, but in too many cases, the ferocity of the fires made it impossible.

Once the fires were brought under control, all that remained were charred buildings, homes, businesses and vehicles. As of August 8, 821 people had been physically affected by fire, with 13 detained in hospital. As many as 1,352 buildings were seriously damaged or destroyed. More than 300 cattle, approximately 3,000 sheep and goats, nearly 4,000 poultry and some 400 beehives were destroyed. The devastated area normally produces over 90 per cent of the world's pine honey annually. Unlike flower honey, pine honey is produced by bees that collect honeydew from a scale insect that lives on the sap of certain pine trees. It is not known how many forest animals or domestic pets were killed.

Antalya is regarded as the tourist capital of Turkey. A popular destination for both foreign and local tourists, it normally has about 15 million visitors from 90 different countries each year. It is also a favourite area for foreigners, particularly Russians and Germans, wishing to take up residence in Turkey. Given the detrimental effect Covid-19 had on the tourist industry last year, Turkey can ill afford a repeat.

One of the largest blazes spread towards the town of Manavgat on the Mediterranean coast about 75 km east of the coastal resort of Antalya. As smoke began to engulf some of the town's streets, television pictures showed residents running for their cars and driving away from the fire.

On July 31, a new blaze erupted in the holiday resort of Bodrum in Muğla province, in the south-west of Turkey where the Aegean Sea joins the Mediterranean. About 300 km west of Antalya, this is an area favoured by tourists from Russia and Ukraine, but is also a hub in which Belgian, British, Dutch, German and Polish nationals reside. As the fire swept close to the town, some residential areas and hotels were evacuated. Tourists in Bodrum were seen on social media moving away from the approaching fire as hotels were evacuated. Because several exits out of the city were impassable owing to flames, Turkish coastguard vessels were deployed, assisted by private boats and yachts, to take holidaymakers to safety.

Turkey has a landmass of around 78 million hectares, of which about 27 per cent are forested. The vast majority is state-owned, under the control of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry which is also responsible for fire management. Wildfires are common in Turkey in the summer, but authorities say the latest blazes covered a much bigger area. According to Professor Yusuf Serengil of the Faculty of Forestry at Istanbul University, the average size of forests ravaged by fire between January 1 and August 5 each year since 2008 has been 17,578 hectares. This compares with an estimated 157,482 hectares during the same period in 2021.

Combatting wildfires in rugged terrain is a challenge for any government because, frequently, it is difficult to fight some blazes at ground level. Lying on the Mediterranean coast, and one of the three most sensitive provinces to forest fires,

approximately three-quarters of the province of Antalya is mountainous. Normally in such cases, helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft are used.

In late July, shortly after the fires had started, a political row erupted over Turkey's lack of fixed-wing aircraft to fight wildland blazes. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry did not have any planes, having previously relied on the Turkish Aeronautical Association (THK) for aircraft. However, the Government claimed that none of the THK's nine firefighting planes were operational. Countering this accusation, the THK claimed that six were, in fact, operational, but it is not clear why they were not utilised.

Azerbaijan initially provided an amphibious aircraft, a helicopter, 53 fire trucks and 510 personnel, while Russia sent three Be-200 amphibious firefighting planes; this was later increased to five, along with three helicopters and two water tankers. Qatar sent a team from its international search and rescue group and Iran provided a firefighting plane and a helicopter. Ukraine sent three An-32P firefighting planes, a water tanker and four helicopters.

Accusation & speculation

Turkey has been a part of the European Civil Protection Mechanism since 2015, but there was some criticism that it did not request assistance until August 1. EU Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič said: "The EU stands in full solidarity with Turkey at this very difficult time." Croatia sent a CL-415 amphibious firefighting plane immediately while Spain sent two CL-415s, together with a Spanish Air Force C-295 transport plane with a team of military emergency unit personnel.

On August 6, it was announced that a further 40 fire trucks and 362 personnel would be coming from Azerbaijan. At the same time, two helicopters and 16 personnel from Kazakhstan would be arriving to assist.

According to AFAD (Turkey's Disaster Management Agency), during August, over 1,900 vehicles and over 8,000 personnel have been engaged in fighting the fires on the ground, while 1,600 sorties were carried out by 15 water bomber planes and over 50 helicopters from the air.

The cause of the fires is a source of speculation, with some authorities suggesting that their seriousness is down to climate change. But arson is also being investigated as a cause. In the past, unscrupulous builders have deliberately set fire to wooded areas in the hope of creating building land in areas popular with tourists. Social media has also suggested that some of the fires may have been started by the Children of Fire Initiative, a PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) affiliated group, which uses environmental destruction as one of its tactics against the state. The PKK is a designated terrorist organisation in Turkey, the European Union, the UK and the USA. 

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