

## International

# Greece facing 'ecological disaster' from wildfires

## More than 100,000 hectares of forests and farmland destroyed

**ATHENS, Greece:** Hundreds of firefighters battled yesterday to contain new flare-ups in wildfire-ravaged areas of Greece, where summer infernos have caused what the prime minister described as the country's "greatest ecological disaster in decades". However, rain overnight in some areas and falling temperatures appeared to have eased the situation after two weeks of devastating blazes, and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said "we can be more optimistic today" than previous days. Greece's most severe heatwave in decades has fanned blazes that have destroyed more than 100,000 hectares of forests and farmland, the country's worst wildfire damage since 2007, the European Forest Fire Information System said yesterday.

The fires have left three dead, hundreds homeless, forced thousands to flee, and caused economic and environmental devastation. Greece is just one of a number of countries in the Mediterranean region that have been hit by a savage fire season which authorities have blamed on climate change. Mitsotakis yesterday described the "mega fires" as Greece's "greatest ecological disaster in decades". "Climate crisis is here... and it tells us that everything must change," he told reporters, pointing to other devastating fires in Turkey, Italy and Algeria. The prime minister said firefighters, volunteers and locals had saved "countless" homes and busi-

nesses, but dozens of properties had been lost nonetheless. Mitsotakis said that 150 homes have been lost in greater Athens over the last week, while the count is ongoing on the island of Evia, which accounts for more than half of the area burned nationwide.

### 'Can't take it anymore'

A fire service official told AFP yesterday that "the fire fronts are still active" on Evia and in the Arcadia region of the Peloponnese peninsula and "fires are constantly flaring up" in both areas. In the north of Evia, where hundreds have been evacuated by boat, 858 firefighters including reinforcements from Ukraine, Romania and Serbia, were battling the flames. And there was fresh concern in Athens after a new fire broke out yesterday morning in the industrial zone of Aspropyrgos, 20 kilometers (12 miles) northwest of the capital. At the height of the fires in early August, the flames had reached the gates of Athens, filling the sky of the city of four million inhabitants with grey smoke.

But after weeks of punishing temperatures often well over 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), a lower 33 degrees Celsius was forecasted for yesterday. The falling temperatures and overnight rain in Evia, the Peloponnese and central Greece had helped improve the situation, said Stathis Koulis, the mayor of Gortynia. The



**GOUVES, Greece:** This file picture taken near the village of Gouves, on Euboea Island, second largest Greek island, shows a raging fire. —AFP

village of Gortynia in a mountainous area of Arcadia 200 kilometers (120 miles) west of Athens has become the primary focus in the Peloponnese, with deep ravines posing a challenge to firefighters. Twenty villages have been evacuated in the area over the past few days and 680 firefighters, including more than a hundred sent to help from France, and five water-dropping air-

craft have been relentlessly battling the flames.

"I can't take it anymore," said farmer Kostis Angelou as he wandered between the corpses of his goats, all 372 of them burnt by a fire that devoured forests on Evia. The 44-year-old managed to survive by spending hours under an irrigation water pipe, surrounded by flames. "A saint saved me," he said. —AFP

## Death toll from Turkey's flash floods rises to five

**TIZI OUZOU, Algeria:** Turkish rescuers distributed food and relocated thousands of people into student dormitories yesterday as the death toll from flash floods that swept across several Black Sea regions rose to five. Heavy storms descended on Turkey's northern stretches just as rescuers reported bringing hundreds of wildfires that have killed eight people since late July under near total control in the south. Turkey has been grappling with drought and a rapid succession of natural disasters that world scientists believe are becoming more frequent and violent because of climate change.

Heavy rains late Tuesday produced flash floods that turned streets into running rivers and sparked mudslides that buckled roads in three northern regions. Rescuers were forced to evacuate a regional hospital holding 45 patients—four of them in intensive care—in the region around the coastal city of Sinop on Wednesday. Images on television and social media showed water rising to the level of street signs in some towns. Turkey's disaster response authority said five people had lost their lives while the search for one person who disappeared in the northern city of Bartin continued. It said more than 1,000 rescuers were working in the region while Turkish Red Crescent teams were distributing food packages and hot meals. —AFP

## Wildfires rage as Algeria observes day of mourning

**TIZI OUZOU, Algeria:** Blazes raged across northern Algeria yesterday as the country observed a national day of mourning for dozens of people killed in the latest wildfires to sweep the Mediterranean. The North African country has been in the grip of devastating fires since Monday that have claimed 69 lives — 41 civilians and 28 soldiers. Soldiers and civilian volunteers have joined firefighters on multiple fronts in the effort to extinguish the blazes that have been fanned by windy and tinder-dry conditions. In Tizi Ouzou district, the area with the highest casualty toll, an AFP journalist reported entire sectors of forest going up in smoke as far as the eye can see.

Villagers forced to evacuate in order to escape the flames began trickling back to their homes, overwhelmed by the scale of the damage. "I have nothing left. My workshop, my car, my flat. Even the tiles were destroyed," one of them told AFP. But he said he had "managed to save his family", while adding that "neighbours died or lost their relatives".

### 'Surge of solidarity'

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune declared three days of national mourning starting from yesterday, and authorities say they suspect widespread arson after so many fires erupted in such a short space of time. On the fourth day of the wildfires, efforts to overcome the blazes are continuing in many regions where civilians and soldiers often with limited means joined the fight. Images of trapped villagers, terrified



**TIZI-OUZOU, Algeria:** Burned houses stand amidst charred trees, following a wildfire in the forested hills of the Kabylie region, east of the Algerian capital Algiers. —AFP

livestock and forested hillsides reduced to blackened stumps have been shared on social media. Algeria is also chartering two firefighting planes from the European Union, aircraft recently used to stop fires in Greece. France announced on Wednesday that it was sending three more aircraft.

Neighboring Morocco, with whom Algeria has long had strained ties over the Western Sahara, also expressed a readiness to help by providing two planes. Faced with the scale of the disaster, pleas for help are multiplying in Algeria and beyond. "Individuals and associations are mobilizing... by organizing collections of clothes, foodstuffs, medicines and hygiene products," said the TSA news website, calling it a "surge of solidarity". —AFP