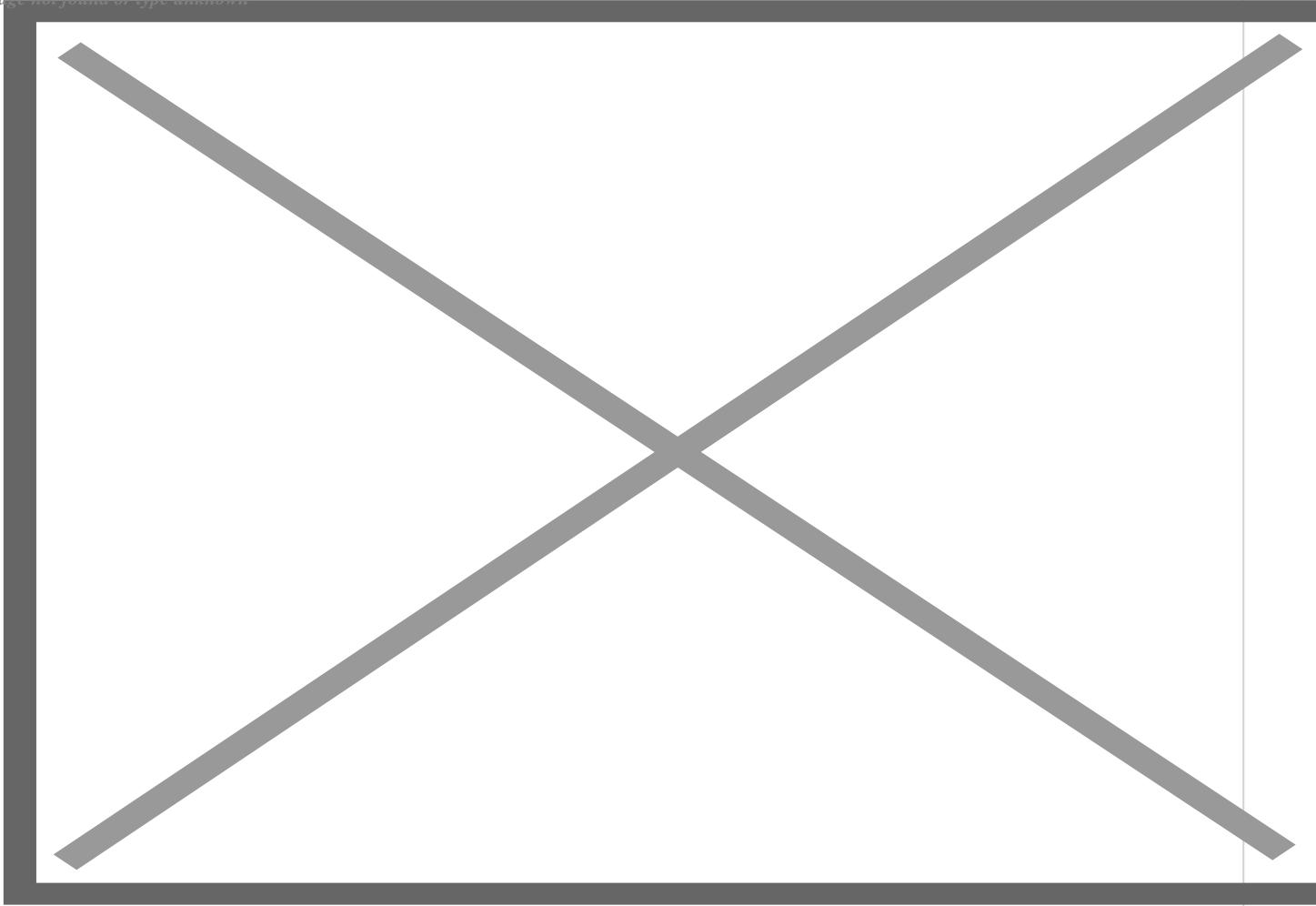


Forest fire forces thousands more people out of homes in France

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Firefighters stand on a road as heavy smoke is seen in the background during forest fires near the city of Origne, France

Paris, July 18 (RHC)-- Thousands more people have been evacuated from their homes in southwestern France as a wildfire continues to rage in the region, according to local officials. About 5,000 people were evacuated on Monday from Les Miquelots, a southern neighbourhood of the town of Teste-de-Buch, with another 3,000 told to leave Pyla-sur-Mer, to the east.

Firefighters have been unable to control the blaze near the Dune de Pilat, Europe's highest sand dune and a summer tourism hot spot, where rapidly changing winds have increased the risk of fire spreading to residential areas that found themselves under clouds of poisonous smoke, they said.

"The smoke is toxic," firefighter spokesman Arnaud Mendousse told the AFP news agency. "Protecting the population is a matter of public health." The blaze is one of two huge wildfires raging since early last week in the Gironde region south of Bordeaux as parts of France are sweltering under record temperatures.

The weather in the region continued to be hot, with temperatures predicted to top 44C (111F) in the Gironde department on Monday. A red alert has been declared for the department and 14 others in western France.

Meanwhile, the wildfire on the Greek island of Crete that erupted on Friday and forced the evacuation of several villages was under control but not yet extinguished as of Monday, authorities said. About 120 firefighters continued to battle the blaze, the daily Kathimerini reported.

The risk of wildfires is considered "very high" across swathes of Greece, including the islands of Euboea, Samos and Lesbos, as well as in the Peloponnese Peninsula and in the Athens area.

The Croatian authorities on the peninsula of Istria issued a directive on Monday banning the use of drinking water to wash cars, streets and other public areas, along with the watering of private or public green areas. Showering with potable water on beaches and at swimming pools is also banned. One exception is the cleaning of food markets.

Violations of the water-saving regulation can be punished by turning off the municipal water supply to the offender, according to local media. The provincial government of Istria cited the ongoing drought as well as weather forecasts that show no precipitation in the foreseeable future.

Extreme heat warnings went into effect in the United Kingdom. The red level alert is set to last Monday and Tuesday, when temperatures could hit a record-breaking 40C (104F) or more. Residents across swathes of the UK have been told to stay indoors during the height of the day, while train operators have told people to avoid using their services due to the impact the extreme temperatures are expected to have on rail infrastructure.

Parts of Germany are expected to hit 40C (104 F) on Tuesday, but otherwise the current heatwave searing the continent will largely pass the country by.

Researchers at the European Commission warned on Monday that nearly half of the European Union's territory is currently at risk of drought due to the heatwave.

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