

Hundreds evacuated as wildfire spreads near Athens

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Police officers and firefighters carried elderly residents out of their homes to safety as the flames approached near the Greek capital

Athens, July 20 (RHC)-- Hundreds of people have been evacuated from their homes as a wildfire threatened mountainside suburbs northeast of Greece's capital, Athens. Firefighters battled through the night, struggling to contain the blaze which was being intensified by strong gusts of wind.

The Hellenic Fire Service said on Tuesday 15 planes and nine helicopters were involved in the firefighting effort on the slopes of Mount Penteli, 25km (16 miles) northeast of Athens, before being grounded at nightfall. Huge clouds of smoke from the blaze were visible in central Athens.

Local officials said homes had been burned or damaged but there were no reports of injuries or stranded people. A children's hospital in the area was also evacuated, officials said.

Greece has been spared the heatwave conditions currently plaguing countries in Western Europe, but fire officials say that hot and dry conditions persisting for weeks as well as longer-term temperature rises have increased the overall risk of forest fires.

More than 130,000 hectares (321,240 acres) of land was damaged by wildfires in Greece last year, the worst damage recorded since 2007.

Fire Service spokesman Yiannis Artopios said four separate evacuation orders had been issued on Tuesday, with push alerts sent to mobile phones in the affected areas. "It's been a tough day," the spokesman said, adding that more than 400 firefighters had been deployed. Some 300 police officers were also on duty to enforce traffic bans and patrol evacuated areas to prevent looting, officials said.

Evangelos Bournous, mayor of Rafina, a town near the fire, said firefighters were trying to protect property until planes and helicopters could again be used at first light.

"The flames get between the hills and form a tunnel of fire. That's very difficult to stop and it's not affected by the wind," Bournous told state-run television. "At night-time, it's essentially an uncontrollable situation."

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