

Wildfires across Algeria kill at least 38 people

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At least 38 people have been killed in wildfires in 14 provinces in Algeria [Algerian Civil Defense/Anadolu Agency]

Algiers, August 19 (RHC)-- Wildfires have killed at least 38 people and injured dozens more across northern Algeria, with the fires continuing to rage in several areas of the North African country.

The blazes on Wednesday ravaged 14 of Algeria's provinces, with residents having previously complained of a lack of government support and readiness during its annual, and deadly, wildfire season.

Meanwhile, emergency responders in the more western Setif province said a 58-year-old mother and her 31-year-old daughter were killed in a blaze there. People were also seen fleeing in Souk Ahras province, which also borders Tunisia, with local media reporting that 350 residents had been evacuated.

Authorities said a total of 39 fires burned on Wednesday, with several still threatening residents into Thursday. Firefighters and helicopters dropping water buckets were working to contain the flames.

Beldjoud said a so-called water bomber plane chartered from Russia had broken down and would not be operational until Saturday. The situation underscored the perennial criticism that Algiers has not invested enough in firefighting technology, including specialised planes, forcing it to seek help from the international community.

In 2021, Algeria appealed to the European Union, already preoccupied with fires in Greece and Turkey, to send water bomber planes amid that year's deadly fires.

Algiers blamed those blazes, which killed 90 people and destroyed more than 4.1 million hectares (10.1 million acres) of forest, on "arsonists" connected to separatist groups and foreign governments.

Writing for Al Jazeera last year, Youcef Bouandel, a professor of political science at Qatar University, argued that the "climate of mistrust and paranoia" surrounding fires in the country had further undermined government preparedness and led to higher death tolls.

Algerian authorities earlier this year also reportedly cancelled a contract with a Spanish company for the supply of seven water bomber planes following a diplomatic dispute between Algiers and Madrid, according to the Mena Defense website.

The discord came after Madrid reversed decades of neutrality on Western Sahara and supported a plan to grant the Moroccan-controlled region internal autonomy, while denying sovereignty. Algeria has long supported Western Sahara's independence movement. Madrid and Algiers began to gradually resume economic ties in July.

Observers say yearly wildfires have increased in Algeria, amid rising global temperatures. Since the start of August, 106 fires have broken out in the country, destroying more than 2,500 hectares (6,178 acres) of woodland.

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