

More than a dozen dead in blazing wildfires in Chile



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Santiago de Chile, February 4 (RHC)-- At least 13 people are reported dead as more than 151 raging wildfires across Chile have destroyed homes and thousands of acres of forest. Local authorities said 11 of the deaths occurred in the town of Santa Juana in Biobio, a region some 500 km south of the capital Santiago.

Among the victims was a firefighter who died after being run over by a fire truck while combating the blaze.

A helicopter that was helping combat the flames crashed in the Araucanía region, killing the pilot, a Bolivian national, and a Chilean mechanic, reports said.

The fires blazed through more than 35,000 acres of land and destroyed over 100 houses since it began on Wednesday.

Interior Minister Carolina Toha said hundreds of homes had been damaged while 151 wildfires were burning throughout the country, including 65 declared under control. Weather forecasts on Friday predicted temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 Celsius) in Nuble's capital, Chillan, with strong winds that risked worsening fire conditions.

President Gabriel Boric on Friday postponed his summer vacation to travel to Nuble and Biobio, which is populated with around 2 million people. He said there is "evidence" that some fires may have been started intentionally.

The South American country has fears of a recurrence of the 2017 fires, which claimed the lives of 11 people, destroyed 1,500 homes, and affected over 1,150,000 acres of forest land. According to experts, wildfires are caused because of two main phenomena: lightning, which causes approximately 60 percent of wildfires, and human activity, which consists of nearly 40 percent.

Smoke from large wildfires negatively affects air quality and can damage the lungs of people thousands of miles away. Wildfire also threatens water quality, destroys animal habitat, and leaves behind stripped land that can easily become eroded and create mudslides.

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