

Forest fires in Chile kill at least 24 as ten arrested for starting blazes

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Photo of a sector affected by the fires today, in Alto de Menque, in the Tomé commune, Biobío region, in Tomé (Chile) | Photo: EFE/ Esteban Paredes Drake

Santiago de Chile, February 6 (RHC)-- The Chilean government reported Sunday that ten people had been arrested for their alleged involvement in the devastating fires destroying thousands of hectares in the country's center and south and that the death toll has risen to 24.

"The government will prosecute the intentional setting of fires. The law is particularly harsh (...) The penalties range from 5 to 20 years," said the Secretary of the Interior, Manuel Monsalve, in a press conference.

In recent hours, a man who had been hospitalized in the city of Angol, in the Araucanía region, died of serious injuries, bringing the death toll to 24.

Monsalve indicated that "there are also 26 people hospitalized with severe burns" and that more than 100,000 hectares and 800 homes have been destroyed. According to the latest report from the National Disaster Prevention and Response Service (Senapred) of the Chilean Ministry of the Interior, there are currently 260 active fires throughout the country, of which 51 are being fought.

The most affected regions are Ñuble, Biobío and La Araucanía, areas of intense agricultural and forestry activity located 400, 500 and 700 kilometers south of the capital, respectively.

The Undersecretary assured that "the fire activity during the night was lower than expected" because temperatures have moderated slightly, but warned that starting Tuesday, the south will face a new heat wave with historical temperatures that could reach 40 degrees Celsius.

"On Friday, there were 76 new fires; on Saturday, there were 16; and today, at this hour, we have eight new fires. We hope they will not continue to grow," Monsalve said.

The Chilean government asked for international help to fight the fires from countries such as Spain, Mexico, Argentina and the United States and declared a state of catastrophe in the three most affected regions.

The images are reminiscent of the wave of fires that swept southern Chile in 2017, the most severe to date, in which a dozen people died.

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