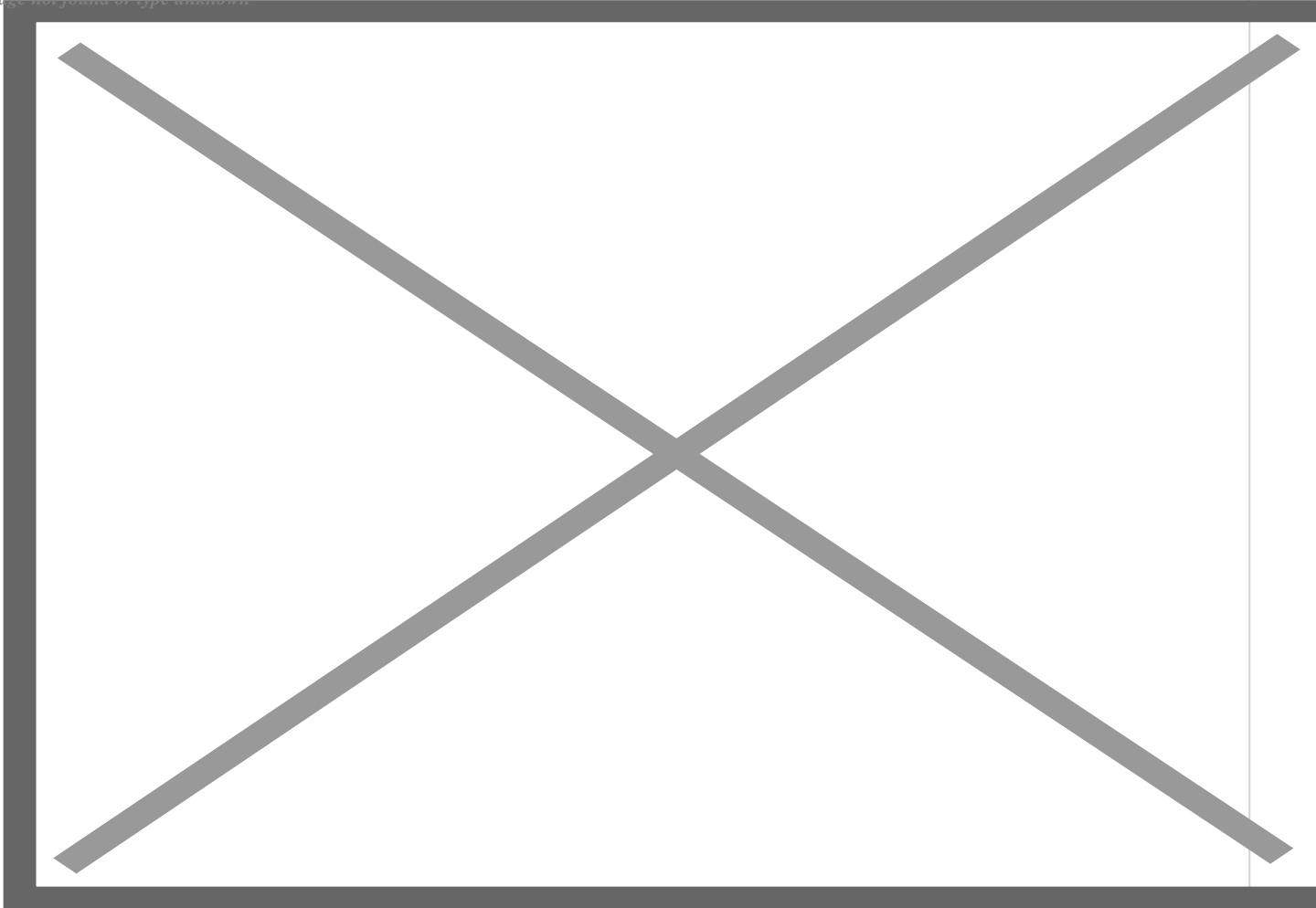


Heatwave grips France, UK and Spain

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A temperature display at a French pharmacy shows 45.5C (114 F) in Toulouse, southwestern France, on June 16, 2022. France is is experiencing its earliest recorded heatwave [Lionel Bonaventure/AFP]

Paris, June 17 (RHC)-- A heatwave has broken a string of records in France and the UK, as parts of Italy suffer drought and Spain battles to contain forest fires that have forced hundreds from their homes.

The heatwave that began earlier in the week intensified on Friday, bringing temperatures from London to Madrid to new highs, according to national weather services. The record-setting hot weather is in line

with warnings from scientists that heatwaves will be more intense and hit earlier than usual as a result of climate change.

Firefighters battled fires in several regions of Spain, including the northwest Sierra de la Culebra where about 200 people fled their homes as forest fires burned up to 7,000 hectares (17,297 acres) of land.

More than 3,000 people were evacuated from the Puy du Fou theme park in central Spain due to a fierce fire nearby.

Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez praised firefighters on Friday "who risk their lives on the front line of fires" as temperatures hit more than 35C in most parts of the country and were expected to reach 40C in some areas.

In France, temperatures also climbed with more than half of all French departments at the highest or second-highest heat alert level by Friday afternoon. Schoolchildren were told to stay home in departments at alert level "red" and the health ministry activated a special heatwave hotline. Much of the country's southwest was expected to hit 40C, prompting warnings for the vulnerable.

"This is the earliest heatwave ever recorded in France" since 1947, said Matthieu Sorel, a climatologist at weather authority Météo France. With "many monthly or even all-time temperature records likely to be beaten in several regions," he called the unseasonable weather a "marker of climate change."

Météo France said temperatures were expected to reach their peak on Saturday before slowly declining. "Hospitals are at capacity, but are keeping up with demand," French health minister Brigitte Bourguignon told reporters in Vienne, near Lyon in the southeast.

Special measures have been taken in care homes for elderly people, still marked by the memory of a deadly 2003 heatwave in France. Buildings are being sprayed down with water to cool them and residents are being rotated through air-conditioned rooms.

"We're taking even more care than usual with the old folks. It's tough for them. They're often alone, worn down physically and unable to act independently," said Sarah Jalabert, a nurse making home visits in the Tarn department.

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