

Firefighters continue to battle blazes as wildfires rage on in southeast France

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A helicopter drops water to extinguish lingering hot spots left by a wildfire near Belin-Beliet, southwestern France, on August 13, 2022. (Photo by AFP)

Paris, August 14 (RHC)-- French firefighters tackled wildfires raging in the country's southeast Saturday as officials kept a wary eye on a huge blaze that appeared to be contained further west.

France has been buffeted this summer by a historic drought that has forced water use restrictions nationwide, as well as a series of heat waves that experts say are being driven by climate change.

On Saturday, a reignited "virulent" fire in the Aveyron department near Toulouse forced the evacuation of more than 130 people, officials said, while another blaze in the department of Drome, south of Lyon, progressed. The Aveyron and Drome fires have destroyed more than 1,200 hectares (3,100 acres).

A fire in the legendary Broceliande Forest in the northwestern region of Brittany, where King Arthur roamed, devastated nearly 400 hectares, but officials said on Saturday the fire was no longer progressing.

A 40-kilometer (25-mile) fire front in the Gironde and Landes departments around Bordeaux also "did not significantly progress overnight. Firefighters are working on its periphery," police said in a statement.

But officials said it was premature to say that the blaze -- which has already reignited once -- was under control. "We remain vigilant" because "while we can't see huge flames, the fire continues to consume vegetation and soil," Arnaud Mendousse, of Gironde fire and rescue, told AFP.

Officials suspect arson may have played a role in the latest flare-up, which has burned 7,400 hectares since Tuesday. Weather forecasters are expecting thunderstorms with wind gusts of up to 60 kilometers (40 miles) an hour in the region in the evening. The wind "could reignite the fire" that "is in a state of pause," Mendousse warned.

In a bid to keep the situation contained, firefighters in Gironde on Saturday were busy dousing the hot and still smoking earth with water. In eastern France, police said on Saturday they were banning entry to most forests in the Bas-Rhin region near the German border.

Cars, cyclists, hikers, hunters and fishermen are prohibited from entry until Tuesday, police said in a statement. Only residents will be able to access the area. "It's an extreme step in the face of an exceptional situation," said Pierre Grandadam, president of a group that includes the Alsace forested communities.

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