

Chile's president urges unity amid battle to contain fatal fires

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A swing is seen after a wildfire burned areas of Santa Juana, Chile on February 5, 2023 [Juan Gonzalez/Reuters]

Santiago de Chile, February 7 (RHC)-- Deadly wildfires continue to burn in Chile as President Gabriel Boric has called for unity and resolve in response to the destruction of more than 1,000 homes and hundreds of thousands of hectares of land across south-central regions of the country.

Authorities said on Monday that conditions conducive to the spread of the fires, which have consumed 270,000 hectares (667,184 acres) and left at least 24 people dead so far, would persist this week.

The blazes are the deadliest in the South American nation in recent years and have already made 2023 the second-worst year on record in terms of hectares burned. Chile's National Forestry Corporation reported that as of Monday morning, 275 fires remained active.

"Unity to face the tragedy, unity to rebuild ourselves. That has been and will always be the path in the face of adversity in our Chile," Boric wrote on Twitter.

Chilean authorities said on Sunday that at least 1,182 people were injured in the wildfires, which have been fanned by strong winds and temperatures that reached above 40 degrees Celsius (104F). Nearly 1,100 homes also were destroyed.

Maria Ines Hernandez, a 55-year-old social worker in Santa Juana, a town about 53 km (33 miles) south of Concepcion in the hard-hit Biobio region, said many houses in the area were reduced to ashes, leaving residents unsure of where to turn.

"It is a miracle that some of the houses were spared," Hernandez told the AFP news agency. "Now we are afraid that the fire will return ... Where will we find refuge? Where? How?"

International aid and personnel began arriving on Sunday from Spain, Argentina and Mexico, while more assistance was expected from several countries in the region, including Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay, Venezuela and Peru.

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said late on Sunday that 180 specialists trained in controlling wildfires had left for Chile to help the nation's civil protection agency get the blazes under control.

Meanwhile, the Portuguese government said on Monday that it was ready to send 140 firefighters to help battle the wildfires, but that it would wait for a response from Chile on its capacity to accommodate the contingent.

Chilean officials said a so-called Ten Tanker plane featuring a 36,000-litre firefighting capacity was expected to arrive on Monday, as well.

Over the weekend, Chile issued emergency declarations for the largely rural southern regions of Biobio, Nuble and Araucania in an effort to speed up relief. The areas are home to extensive forests as well as farms that grow grapes and other fruit for export.

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