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Sixty nine dead in Algeria as forest fires devastate the Mediterranean region

At least 69 people have died in Algeria, according to the latest reports, as forest fires and record temperatures ravage the north of the country and the entire Mediterranean basin. It is the greatest loss of life in this series of wildfires which now stretch from Turkey and Greece across the Balkans, Italy and Spain to Algeria.



In this photo taken Wednesday, Aug.11, 2021, smoke invades the mountains after wildfires in the village of Larbaa Nath Irathen, near Tizi Ouzou, in the mountainous Kabyle region, 100 kilometers (60 miles) east of Algeria's capital of Algiers. Wildfires in Algeria that already have killed at least 69 people burned through the mountainous Berber region as

the North African country contended Thursday with a heat wave like the ones fueling fires in Southern Europe. (AP Photo/Fateh Guidoum)

In Algeria, the fires are concentrated primarily in Kabylia, east of the capital, Algiers. The Algerian regime has given partial details on military losses, while many villages are surrounded by vast walls of flame in the mountains.

“It is with great sadness that we learned of the deaths of 25 members of the National Popular Army (ANP), after they managed to save over 100 citizens from forest fires in the Béjaïa and Tizi Ouzou areas,” Algerian President Abdelmajide Tebboune declared Tuesday. The National Defense Ministry added that 18 of the deceased soldiers and six other badly burned soldiers came from the 57th Light Infantry Battalion stationed at Ichelladhen. Seven other wounded soldiers, four of whom are severely burned, are of the 4th Independent Infantry Battalion.

ANP and local authorities are finding many civilian victims, often rural laborers who died while trying to protect their crops and livestock. Yesterday, 26 people were found dead in the village of Agulmim.

Wednesday morning, Algeria’s General Directorate of Civil Protection counted 69 active fires in 14 wilayas (police prefectures) of the country. The Tizi Ouzou wilaya, the worst-hit, had 24 of these fires; since August 9, it has seen 116 forest fires in total.

Already staggered by the 2019 *hirak* protests, a mass movement of youth and workers against the military regime, the Algerian ruling class felt forced to criticize the lack of equipment and preparation to fight the fires. The Berber-nationalist Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) and the Workers Party (PT), close to the Algerian regime, both criticized the lack of firefighting planes. Already in June, forest fires in the Khenchela areas had underscored the urgent necessity to acquire such aircraft.

Yesterday, in a nationally-televised speech, Tebboune announced that aircraft had arrived that could bring the fires under control. Until then, Algerian authorities were forced to rely on military helicopters to drop water on the fires.

Tebboune declared, “I instructed the prime minister, as the fires began, to request aircraft from our European partners, but unfortunately no country responded favorably to our

requests, as all the aircraft were already deployed to fight fires in Greece and in Turkey. But two French aircraft have arrived today, two Spanish aircraft are due to arrive tomorrow, and a further Swiss aircraft should arrive in the next three days. With all these planes, it will be possible to get the forest fires under control.”

Tebboune added that the military had been designated to coordinate the purchase by the Algerian state of firefighting aircraft from international aircraft manufacturers.

Yesterday, French firefighting aircraft began operations, dropping loads of water on the region of Béjaïa. French President Emmanuel Macron tweeted: “In the face of the tragedies facing the friends of France, our solidarity is without limit. To the Algerian people, I would like to bring all our support. As soon as tomorrow, two firefighting aircraft and a command airplane will be deployed to Kabylia, which faces violent fires.”

In fact, the fires devastating Algeria and the entire region expose above all the lack of international preparation and coordination in the face of climate change. Responsibility for this lies above all with the European imperialist powers. While European countries are spending billions of euros on military spending increases, and while Paris sends fighter-bombers and drones to wage war in Mali and across the Sahel region south of Algeria, the most essential equipment and infrastructure for fighting fires is lacking.

Extreme heat and drought are affecting large parts of the Mediterranean basin. A heat wave is beating all record temperatures, with Sicily, Turkey and Tunisia all recording temperatures of 49°C (120°F).

These conditions facilitate the eruption of gigantic fires. In eight days, Greece has seen 586 fires that claimed three lives. Hundreds of fires in Turkey have claimed at least eight lives, and over 500 fires in Italy have claimed four lives and led to the declaration of a state of emergency in Sicily. In the former Yugoslavia, North Macedonia has also declared a state of emergency due to fires, which are also devastating the border region between Bosnia and Croatia.

In the final analysis, the cause of these disastrous events is the incapacity and the refusal of the capitalist classes around the world, over several decades, to plan an environmental policy that could halt global warming. According to several investigations and

environmental models produced by climate scientists, this warming will violently impact the Mediterranean.

“It’s going to be a desert climate all around the Mediterranean by the end of the century,” Levent Kurmaz, of Istanbul’s Bogazici University, told the British *Independent*. The newspaper added that by then, “the climate in southern Turkey, southern Greece and southern Italy will be similar to that of Cairo and the southern Iraqi city of Basra now.”

Tebboune and other Algerian officials are claiming that all the forest fires are the work of criminals and have launched a wave of arrests, supposedly to identify the arsonists. Djamel Bensmaïl, aged 35, died in a lynching in Larbaâ Nath Irathen on Tuesday, after a crowd falsely identified him as an arsonist while he came from the city of Miliana to help fight the fires. Yesterday, inhabitants of the town presented an apology to his father.

In reality, it is apparent that the fundamental cause of these fires, and especially of their massive scale, is global warming and the disastrous oversight of the economy by the ruling class.

Yesterday, Abdelkader Benkheira, the former Director for Fauna and Flora of Algeria’s General Forestry Directorate, explained to *Middle East Eye* the vulnerability of Mediterranean forests to fire and its link to global warming. He said, “The forest materials have a great deal of resin and are very flammable. There is also a great deal of other living material such as underbrush and scrub in which there are trees, including oak and olive trees.”

Weather conditions like the current ones, he added, provoke fires and even explosions in such areas. “Forests are living environments, trees and resin in particular sweat and give off gases called terpenes. These virtually inflammable gases play a major role in propagating such fires and are even capable of provoking explosions inside large forest bodies, especially in uneven terrain, when proper air circulation is lacking. Then one has a process of gas concentration that can lead to spontaneous explosions.”

Global warming, which also intensifies conditions of drought in the region, can set off mega-forest fires, Benkheira explained.

He said, “Caused by global warming, water stress is bearing down with enormous force on Mediterranean forests, reinforced by rising temperatures and growing frequency and strength of heavy winds. ... This water stress leads to a reduction of humidity in the soil. This unwatered soil leads to stressed vegetation, which is almost completely dry, and so is easily flammable. And then there are the periods of violent winds.”

As the deaths of millions of people worldwide in the COVID-19 pandemic points to the failure and the political criminality of capitalist ruling elites, the Mediterranean forest fires again show the urgent necessity for workers to overthrow them in an international socialist revolution that can impose rational health and environmental policies.

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