

Greece: Firefighters rescue 25 migrants trapped in forest as massive wildfire approached

Greek firefighters have rescued a group of 25 migrants trapped in a forest in northeastern Greece as flames from a massive wildfire burning for two weeks approached

By Elena Becatoros
1 September 2023

ATHENS, Greece — Greek firefighters rescued a group of 25 migrants trapped in a forest in northeastern Greece Friday as flames from a massive wildfire burning for two weeks approached, authorities said.

The fire department said the group became trapped in the forest between two villages in the Evros region, near the border with Turkey. No injuries were reported. There was no immediate information on their nationalities.

The blaze, burning for the 14th day Friday, has already been blamed for the deaths of 20 people whose bodies were found last week. All are believed to have been migrants who had recently crossed the border. Greece's Disaster Victim Identification Team has been tasked with identifying the remains.

A multinational force of more than 580 firefighters backed by six planes and two helicopters is battling the wildfire that began on Aug. 19 and within days had joined with other blazes to form the largest single wildfire in a European Union country since records began in 2000.

The fire has burned homes and vast tracts of forest, scorching more than 81,000 hectares (200,000 acres).

Overnight, residents of the border town of Soufli were put on alert for possible evacuation as a huge wall of flames approached. To date, thousands of people have been evacuated from their homes in villages and towns in northeastern Greece due to the fire, although the vast majority have since been allowed back.

Greece has been stricken by hundreds of wildfires across the country this summer, with dozens of new blazes breaking out each day. The vast majority are extinguished quickly before they spread, but the Evros blaze has proved particularly tough to control.

Another persistent blaze has been burning for more than a week in a national park on the slopes of Mount Parnitha, on the fringes of Athens, with more than 160 firefighters trying to extinguish occasional flare-ups.

With its own firefighting forces stretched to the limit, Greece called on other European countries for help, and has received hundreds of firefighters and a dozen aircraft from France, Germany, Spain, Cyprus, Romania, Albania, Serbia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic.

Arson is suspected in some of the smaller fires that were quickly brought under control, and authorities have made several arrests across the country. But the causes of the major blazes are still under investigation.

Speaking in Parliament Thursday, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis implied — without providing any evidence — that migrants may have been responsible for the Evros fire, even though he noted an investigation into the causes is still ongoing.

“It is almost certain that the causes were manmade. And it is also almost certain that this fire started on routes that are often used by illegal migrants who have entered our country,” Mitsotakis said. “We don’t know if it was negligence or deliberate.”

Last week, three people – two Greeks and one Albanian national – were arrested in northeastern Greece and charged with a series of crimes for allegedly rounding up 13 people from Syria and Pakistan and forcing them into a car trailer, accusing them, without any evidence, of setting fires.

Mitsotakis said incidents of vigilantism would not be tolerated.

On Friday, a court in the northeastern city of Alexandroupolis ordered the three to be jailed pending trial, said Nikos Karavellakis, a lawyer representing the eight Syrians who had been sequestered in the trailer. The three suspects had been under house arrest since their arrest.

Greece is one of the preferred entry routes into the European Union for people from the Middle East, Africa and Asia fleeing conflict and poverty. Those crossing the country’s land border with Turkey often use mountain and forest trails to evade authorities and head west to the main northern city of Thessaloniki.

Several people, all Greeks, have been arrested in the past two weeks on suspicion of arson for allegedly deliberately attempting to start wildfires.

Kantouris reported from Thessaloniki, Greece