

Death toll rises as Chile reels from wildfires driven by heatwave

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A firefighter shoots water out of a hose to douse flames in a nearby forest while others watch
[Juan Gonzalez/Reuters]

Santiago de Chile, February 4 (RHC)-- Wildfires in the South American nation of Chile have killed an estimated seven people as blazes tear across wide swathes of forests and farmland, incinerating homes.

As of Friday, authorities were struggling to contain the many wildfires that had erupted, burning through more than 14,000 hectares (34,595 acres) of land across the country. The fires have been exacerbated

by a nearly 13-year-long drought in the country, as well as a heat wave.

Many of the fires are concentrated in the Biobío region, located about 560 kilometres (348 miles) south of the capital city of Santiago. Four of the deaths reported so far have taken place there and many of the deaths involved vehicles.

"In one case, they were burned because they were hit by the fire," interior minister Carolina Toha said. In the other case, she added, they suffered an accident while "probably trying to escape the fire." The Associated Press also reported that a firefighter was hit by a truck while fighting the flames.

The government has declared a state of catastrophe in Biobio and the neighbouring region of Nuble, another area hit hard by the fires. Toha said the region of La Araucania was also struggling to contain the blazes, amid strong winds and high temperatures fuelled by Chile's withering heat wave.

On Friday, weather forecasts predicted temperatures of more than 38 degrees Celsius (100 degrees Fahrenheit) in Nuble's capital of Chillan. Hundreds of homes have reportedly been damaged or destroyed, but the exact number remains uncertain.

Chile's President Gabriel Boric cut his vacation short to visit affected areas, saying the "full force of the state will be deployed" to control the blazes and assist victims.

Partly due to climate change, wildfires have grown in scope, intensity and frequency as rising temperatures and drought heighten fire conditions around the world, resulting in explosive blazes in places like Chile, Algeria, France, Spain and the western United States.

In late December, a forest fire near the coastal resort town of Vinas Del Mar in Chile killed at least one person and destroyed more than 100 homes. "Families are having a very difficult time," Ivonne Rivas, the mayor of Tome in the Biobío region, told a local radio station. "It's hell what they are living through, the fire got away from us."

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