

Firefighters struggle to contain wildfire in Spain



Burnt vegetation in wildfire-hit Almeria province in Spain on Saturday. (Reuters)

Bejar, Spain: Hundreds of firefighters backed by helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft struggled on Saturday to contain one of Spain's deadliest wildfires that killed at least 12 people.

A combination of light winds and high humidity is helping crews, but the sheer size of the fire still poses challenges, Antonio Sanz, head of Andalusia's emergency services, said. The fire has scorched some 66 square kilometres of forest and farmland, about the size of Manhattan.

Sanz said fire crews carried out controlled burns overnight around the perimeter of the fire, which broke out late on Thursday in a semi-arid area near the Sierra de Los Filabres mountains in Almeria province, just as Spain was sizzling.

Most of the victims, who are believed to be foreign nationals, died after ignoring shelter-in-place instructions, authorities said. Seven people died while on foot after abandoning their cars.

Four of the dead were believed to be British because the steering wheel of their burned-out car was on the right side, as with British vehi-

cles, regional authorities said.

Sanz said on Saturday that authorities had completed autopsies and DNA samples were collected to identify them.

Authorities proactively evacuated 1,448 people from some 11 areas.

Fleeing the flames

Jeffrey and Christine Kember were watching a favourite TV show in their Los Pinos farmhouse when the blare of a siren alerted them to the fire.

Jeffrey Kember said at the sight of the advancing flames, both he and his wife jumped into their respective cars while also trying to help a neighbour with two toddlers.

He described how the couple got separated and how he was unable to speak to his wife because she didn't have a phone with her.

"I'm driving through the flames. It was actually flames. I thought, 'I can't stop, I just gotta go,'" Jeffrey Kember told The Associated Press, with his wife next to him outside an evacuation centre.

"It was eerie because all of a sudden, I came out of the flames, and it was all bright sunshine. It was surreal. Ridiculous!"

Spanish authorities ar-

rested two people for ignoring evacuation orders and returning to a high-risk area, according to Spain's official EFE news agency. Authorities are still combing through the Bedar area in search of any victims.

Spain has battled frequent and severe heatwaves in recent years, with temperatures often exceeding 40 degrees Celsius. Wind, high temperatures and little rainfall help small wildfires grow into unchecked blazes.

Justice minister Felix Bolanos on Saturday attributed the ferocity of the Almeria wildfire to a "climate emergency". He said the fire, at its most intense, advanced as fast as 100 meters per minute.

In June, Spain experienced several days of record-setting heat, with over 1,000 excess deaths.

Europe is the world's fastest-warming continent, with temperatures increasing twice as fast as the global average since the 1980s, according to the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service. Parts of Western Europe are facing their third heatwave in six weeks.