



Fanned by high winds, forest fires burn on the eastern edge of Athens where residents, right, turned out to help fight the blaze. Rare plants and animals are under threat from the advancing flames PHOTOGRAPHS: DIMITR MESSINIS/LOUISA GOULIAMANO

Developers blamed for Greek fires

THE GUARDIAN 30.7.98 P.F.

Helena Smith in Athens

ARSON by property developers has been blamed for Greece's worst-ever forest fires, which are raging through vast areas of the country for a second week and have already devoured some 400,000 acres, including some of southern Europe's richest coniferous forests.

"Fires have been reported at 180 spots nationwide which is unprecedented," said George Romaios, the public order minister. "Many have

erupted on several fronts at the same time and that leaves us in no doubt that they were started deliberately."

The arson theory has been reinforced by the discovery of fireworks and sophisticated time bombs in remote forest areas. Greek police said some "pyromaniacs" had been arrested recently and others had been spotted driving into woodlands and throwing fireworks from their cars.

Environmentalists say Greece's lack of forest tenure maps and a land registrar had whetted the appetite of arsonists in the pay of property developers. Once cleared, land

is grabbed by speculators who often build on the scorched earth within weeks. The illegal constructions are invariably legalised by politicians.

"This is a phenomenon that goes back to just after the second world war when people were very poor and the dream of every Greek family was to own a home," said Aristotelis Papageorgiou, forest officer at the Greek branch of the World Wide Fund for Nature. "Much of the land that is being burnt now is very valuable. It's no coincidence that the mountains around Athens have been targeted. Mount Pan-

nitha is where the 2004 Olympic Games village will be built ... we're talking about long-term investors here."

The agriculture minister, Stefanos Tzoumakas, has supported accusations that the forestry service has been actively concealing instances of "land grabbing" in burnt-out forest areas. "They [foresters] are acting like a state within a state," he said.

But the Socialist government has also been criticised for switching the responsibility for fire-fighting from the forestry service to the fire brigade in May. "These fires are testimony to a complete

lack of co-ordination that now exists as a result of that switch," Mr Papageorgiou said. "The fire brigade... has no experience with wild fires and, my God, do we know it."

Last week three firemen and a volunteer died in a forest fire outside Athens.

And this week the Temple of Apollo at Delphi came close to being reduced to cinders.

"More land, olive groves and orchards have been burnt this year than at any other time and we are only half way through the summer season," said Mr Papageorgiou. "Worst of all, the black pine

forest on Mount Taygetos is now ablaze." The forest is home to more than 160 Greek endemic plant species and 36 internationally endangered species of fauna.

Fire-fighting has been hampered by gale force winds. With vast swathes of Greece now a wasteland of withered trees dotted with the charred carcasses of wild animals, growing numbers of people have been forced to leave their homes. And thousands of tourists have abandoned hotels in the seaside resort of Loutraki as the inferno creeps towards the ancient city of Corinth.

