

## EUROPE: A CONTINENT HIT BY EXTREMES

## FRANCE: MUDSLIDES, FLOODS - AND DROUGHT

FRANCE HAS been cut in two by extremes of bad weather since the end of last week. In the north and west, there have been torrential rainstorms, mud slides and temperatures 6C below normal. The south, especially the south-east, has been afflicted by drought, high winds and 70 forest fires, including one that killed two firefighters.

With a record number of tourists expected to visit France this year, partly thanks to the weakness of the euro, the country had been hoping to break a pattern of "rotten Julys". No such luck, so far.

The rain was even spreading into the south yesterday, although better weather is forecast from Thursday.

Since last Thursday, the north has been lashed by the same unseasonal weather that has washed over the British Isles. The averagerainfall of the month of July - 45 litres per

square metre - fell on parts of the Paris area in just one day on Friday. The temperature, from Brittany to Alsace, has been 15C to 18C, six below normal for July. Snow was forecast on high ground in the Auvergne and Alps last night.

High winds in the Bay of Biscay forced the suspension of renewed efforts to pump oil from the wreck of the tanker *Erika*, which sank off southern Brittany in December. Mudslides in railway cuttings forced the diversion of high-speed trains to the west and south-west at the weekend.

South of the Massif Central, the country has faced a plague of a different kind. Days of dry weather, followed by the high, dry mistral and canicule winds, brought a rash of forest fires. Tens of thousands of acres of scrub and forest were burnt in Provence and Corsica. At Cornillon-Confoux, just

north-west of Marseilles, two firefighters were cut off as they tried to flee the blaze in their truck on Sunday, and burnt to death. Their funeral yesterday was attended by hundreds of their colleagues.

Meteo-France blamed the weather on a huge anti-cyclone anchored in the Atlantic off Portugal. Typically, the anti-cyclone would settle on the Continent at this time of year, bringing dry, sunny weather. Instead, western Europe has been lashed by its fringes.

French meteorologists say the run of poor Julys since the beginning of the 1990s is "coincidence", and there is no reason yet to seek cataclysmic explanations, such as permanently disturbed weather from a build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. They say the rainfall and temperatures are not yet the worst on record for the month.

JOHN LICHFIELD



The heat wave in Greece has led to forest fires

## GREECE: HEAT WAVES AND FOREST FIRES

GREECE IS tackling its worst forest fires for decades, with thousands of acres destroyed, and a massive operation to stop the flames on the holiday island of Samos.

Temperatures in Greece have been as high as 44C or 110F over the past week, prompting the Greek government to activate an emergency civil defence plan. Forecasters say high temperatures could return again later in the week.

The government has declared a state of emergency on Samos, sending in 70 fire engines and 700 firefighters and authorising the local municipality to hire anything that can fly and dump water.

"We have not had to face such adverse conditions in decades," said the government's spokesman, Dimitras Reppas. He blamed a dry winter that had made much of Greece a tinderbox, high winds

and a recent record heatwave.

The Greek authorities fear a repeat of the killer heat-wave of 1987, in which between 950 and 1,200 people died from effects of the heat and the consequent pollution.

They have cancelled all leave for ambulance drivers, and hospitals are open around the clock to deal with cases of heat exhaustion.

Local councils have set up a service that sends buses to collect vulnerable people including the elderly and bring them to air-conditioned public buildings during the hottest part of the day.

Air-conditioned shopping centres have been told to stay open longer. Television stations are carrying special heat-wave bulletins, which give updates on temperature levels and advice on how to keep cool.

The interior minister has ordered the immediate mobilisation of rubbish collectors in

western Athens - who were threatening to strike - thus heading off the prospect of rotting piles of waste on the pavements of the teeming city as temperatures reach their highest in 10 years.

Over the past week, sales of air-conditioning equipment have reached a record level, as has the demand for electricity, and there have been power cuts in several parts of the city. A government minister was forced to make a television broadcast to reassure people the national grid was not breaking down.

The Greek government has been meeting in emergency session as more fires break out. The British travel agents' association, Abta, is advising visitors to stay in constant touch with their tour operator before they leave, and take precautions against heat exhaustion.

PAUL WOOD