

Continent of contrasts, from fires to floods

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A losing battle: a firefighter tackles a forest blaze near the village of Shimatari, 40 miles north of Athens



A villa survived a fire in La Cadieres D'Azur in southern France which destroyed 1,500 acres of pine forest

FREAK weather conditions which have brought fire, flood and death to Europe over the last week continued to cause havoc yesterday.

In the southern part of the Continent, firemen were on standby to prevent more of the blazes which have destroyed thousands of acres of parched scrubland and forest.

In the north, thousands of people have been left homeless by floods. Road, rail and air traffic has been disrupted. The last working reactor at Chernobyl in the Ukraine was shut down yesterday

after basement areas filled with water, leading to fears of a short circuit.

French meteorologists blamed the unseasonably low temperatures on the failure of a warming anti-cyclone to shift eastwards from the Azores. Instead, the country has been hit by a cold front marching south from the Arctic.

Yesterday, the route of the Tour de France was blanketed in mist and drizzle as the riders tackled the high passes of the Pyrenees.

Average temperatures in the

Paris area, which has suffered torrential rain, have hovered around 66F (18C), against a July norm of 78F (24C). Forecasters said there was little sign of an improvement before the weekend.

In stark contrast, the south of France was struggling through a heatwave and there were warnings yesterday that a mistral could fan further fires today.

Two firemen were killed near the town of Cornillon-Confoux in the department of Bouches du

By Patrick Blahop In Paris and our European correspondents

Rhône after their vehicle was surrounded by flames.

At least 40 people in southern Europe have died of heat-related heart attacks or by being trapped in their homes by fires.

Temperature records have been toppled across southern Europe, with the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, suffering its hottest day for 112 years. A state of emergency was declared yesterday as a 63-mile wide wall of fire set villages ablaze.

Italy is in the grip of its worst

heatwave for 21 years, with fires devouring some of its most beautiful landscapes.

Hillsides above the expensive resort of Portofino on the Ligurian coast were still smouldering yesterday and a pine forest park near the Roman seaside resort of Ostia has been destroyed.

A Club Mediterranée resort at Metaponta in Apulia was temporarily evacuated after it was threatened by fire.

In Athens, temperatures hit more than 120F in the shade (45C)

and inhabitants fled to the countryside to escape a blanket of smog.

Elsewhere, nearly 5,000 firemen tried to control 150 blazes, including one on the island of Samos, which has devastated a fifth of its surface. Temperatures are expected to rise again today.

Croatia, which last week also suffered temperatures touching 120F, has been hit by hailstorms which flattened fruit trees that survived a drought earlier this month.

Fires were also burning in Kosovo, where firefighting efforts

were hampered by unexploded mines that still litter the province.

Alain Morel, a French meteorologist, said the torrid weather was caused by an anticyclone over the Balkans which has sucked in hot dry air from the Sahara.

There is relief at hand, however, as forecasters said temperatures could start dropping below 110F (40C) tomorrow.

A mass of cold air from central Europe is expected to break through the high pressure bank, bringing change.



Bucketing down: visitors in Scarborough yesterday

But Britain stays shrouded in a summertime gloom

AS THE rain forced Wimbledon into extra time, curtailed the Lord's cricket and all but drowned out the annual rock concert in Hyde Park, Britain could be forgiven for thinking it was in the grip of one of its worst summers. But Britain would be wrong.

The Meteorological Office yesterday announced figures which showed that the first six weeks of the summer have been drier and warmer than average.

Continually grey skies may have given the impression that it has done nothing but rain, but across

England and Wales rainfall for June — measured at 38mm — was only 56 per cent of the long-term average.

The chill northern winds of recent days are equally misleading. June has officially been declared "warm" by weathermen after average temperatures were calculated at 14.7C — 0.7C above the 30-year average for 1961-90.

The Met Office offered two possible explanations for summer 2000 feeling damp and gloomy. First, April and May really were as

By Peter Foster

wet as they appeared, breaking records set as far back as 1782. Many parts of England and Wales had three times average rainfall.

Second, there has been little in the way of sunshine. "I think it is probably the lack of sun that is causing all this concern," said Sean Clarke in the Met Office. "When there is sunshine people tend not to notice the rain."

Although official figures show an average of 5.89 hours of sun per day (94 per cent of the 30-year

average) many parts have not been so lucky. In London, the sun shone for 173.5 hours in June, compared to an average figure of 215 hours.

Britain's cold snap is explained by the position of the jet stream, the ribbon of fast moving air that controls weather patterns.

"There is a good reason why there is high pressure in the Balkans and the Atlantic but low pressure over the UK and northern Europe," said Mr Clarke. "The jet stream forms sinusoidal [snake-like] waves so while Britain is in a trough, with the accompanying low

pressure, southern Europe is in a corresponding peak, with accompanying high pressure."

Which means the showers and arctic winds dominating Britain's weather are expected to persist for several days, but there may be warmer weather over the horizon.

"You have to be optimistic," added Mr Clarke. "Do you remember the summer of '95 which started with a very wet June and suddenly heated up? We didn't see it coming until three days before it happened, so things can change quickly."