The situation

Deadly forest fires starting on Saturday, 17 June 2017 in the village of Escalos Fundeiros has swept through central Portugal killing at least 62, injuring 62 and displacing some 200 people to date. The blaze is thought to have been caused by a lightning that struck a tree at around 2 p.m. on the 17th in a dry thunderstorm. Within a few hours, the flames have rapidly spread from the municipality of Pedrogão Grande to Castanheira de Pêra e Figueiró dos Vinhos and further along four fronts surrounding several villages, killing and injuring civilians and destroying houses and roads. Many people have burned to death in their cars and on the road after becoming trapped by the flames on the road between Figueirô dos Vinhos and Castanheira de Pêra. Others have died from smoke inhalation. To date, 18 people have been taken to hospitals in Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra, five of them – four firefighters and a child – seriously injured.

Portuguese authorities have evacuated the district emergency plans and national contingency plan in the night of the 17th and requested international assistance from the EU’s Civil Protection Mechanism for aircraft support. Spain has dispatched two and France sent three water-bombing planes on Sunday morning to help the Portuguese fire service contain the fires. Portugal’s Social Welfare Department is providing social support for the displaced through 400 social welfare officials, assisted by the Portuguese Red Cross (see further details below). Dozens of people who fled their homes have been taken in by residents of nearby municipalities. Four shelters have also been established and are run by Social Welfare.

According to the latest (morning of 19 June) data of the Portuguese Civil Protection, more than 800 personnel (firemen, INEM, civil protection, Red Cross and Armed Forces) are currently combating the fires in the affected areas in the district of Leiria assisted by 350 vehicles and ten aircrafts. The death toll is expected to rise as many are still missing and the flames continue to spread. Three days of national mourning has been declared until Tuesday.
The forest fires happened amid severe heatwave with temperatures reaching 40 °C in some areas of the country over the past days. On 15 June 2017, a heat and fire alert had already been issued by the Portuguese Civil Protection in response to the hot weather forecast for 16-18 June. Portugal, like most of southern Europe is prone to forest fires in the dry summer months. This blaze is the country's worst forest fire in more than half a century.

Red Cross and Red Crescent action

The Portuguese Red Cross has immediately activated their branch network across the country on 17 June to assist all people affected and in need. A total of 204 staff and volunteers have been deployed from 27 branches and local structures. A total of 40 ambulances, three logistics units, two dead body management vehicles and one healthcare clinic have been mobilized. PRD staff and volunteers are providing a range of services including with evacuation, health care (mainly transferring patients to hospitals and first aid) and psychosocial support as well as distribution of masks. They are also ready to start distributing relief items including water, food, beds and blankets as required. Fifty medical health emergencies outside the affected area were also responded to by the PRC’s ambulance services.

Through its network and expertise, the PRC has offered its services in restoring family links to the Civil Protection Authority for those who have been separated from their family members while being evacuated or fleeing the blaze. A hotline was created by the Civil Protection Authority for helping reestablish family contacts. The National Society is also providing assistance with dead body management in the affected areas, including pre-positioning of body bags, as needed.

Resource Mobilization

The Portuguese Red Cross has launched a national appeal to support the ongoing emergency activities and raise required funds.

Cash transfers can be done through:
- bank account transfer: IBAN PT50 001000003631911000174 - CÓDIGO SWIFT BBPIPTPL
- online donations: http://www.cruzvermelha.pt/donativos/donativo-pontual.html
  https://www.facebook.com/cruzvermelhaportuguesa.sede

Communications

The Portuguese Red Cross has been active on its website and social media since the start of the disaster, promoting its national appeal and informing the public how they can help. The IFRC communications team in Geneva and Budapest has supported social media activity on global channels and is in touch with the National Society counterpart.

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How we work

All IFRC assistance seeks to adhere to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief and the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (Sphere) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable. The IFRC’s vision is to inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies, with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.