

Deadly Los Angeles wildfires threaten Hollywood

AFP- Wildfires threatened to engulf parts of Hollywood on Wednesday as a growing number of blazes raged across Los Angeles, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee their homes and claiming at least five lives.

Fast-moving flames fanned by powerful winds have levelled 1,500 structures, many of them multi-million dollar homes in a rolling tragedy that one forecast said could end up costing over \$50 billion.

Over 100,000 people have been told to flee at least five separate blazes, including in the heart of historic Hollywood, just a few hundred meters (yards) from the storied theaters of Hollywood Boulevard.

Los Angeles County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone said his crews were struggling with the scale and speed of the unfolding disasters.

"We're doing the very best we can. But no, we don't have enough fire personnel in LA County between all the departments to handle this," he said.

New fires appeared to be spotting as embers were thrown up to 2.5 miles (four kilometers) including one that razed a large property late Wednesday in the densely populated Studio City area.

Adam Vangerpen of Los Angeles County Fire Department said crews were fighting to stop this new fire from spreading.

"It's a four-story home... we did just have the winds pick up again, so we are seeing some ember casting," he said.

"Our hope is to hit it hard and make sure that we're trying to

keep it out of the brush right now, because with the winds picking up there in the hills, that is a concern of ours.”

Millions of Angelenos have watched in horror as a series of blazes have erupted around America’s second biggest city, sparking panic and fear.

A fire in the Hollywood Hills late Wednesday caused an evacuation order for a number of streets in the historic district, as firefighters took to the skies to dump water on the blaze.

The sudden eruption created gridlock on Hollywood’s streets, hampering efforts by people who live in the area – a mixture of ritzy homes and rent-controlled apartments – to leave.

Sharon Ibarra, 29, told AFP she had rushed into Hollywood when she heard of the blaze to see if she could help her boss with her two babies.

“I am super nervous, scared because of everything that has happened in the other places,” she said.

“Thank God there is not much wind like yesterday.”

That wind – with gusts up to 100 miles (160 kilometers) an hour – spread the fire around the ritzy Pacific Palisades neighborhood with lightning speed.

At least 16,000 acres (6,500 hectares) burned there, with 1,000 homes and businesses razed.

A separate 10,600-acre (4,300-hectare) fire was burning around Altadena, north of the city, where flames tore through suburban streets.

– Lost everything –

Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said five people were known to have perished, with more deaths feared.

Among those who died was 66-year-old Victor Shaw, whose sister told local broadcaster KTLA he had ignored pleas to leave as the fire swept through his Altadena area neighborhood because he wanted to stay and protect their home.

“When I went back in and yelled out his name, he didn’t reply back,” Shari Shaw said.

“I had to get out because the embers were so big and flying like a firestorm that I had to save myself.”

Shaw’s body was found by a friend some time later on the driveway of his razed home, a garden hose in his hand.

William Gonzales got out alive, but his Altadena home was gone.

“We have lost practically everything; the flames have consumed all our dreams,” he told AFP.

Pasadena fire chief Chad Augustin said up to 500 buildings had been lost to the flames in that area.

He hailed the bravery of first responders. “Our death count today would be significantly higher without their heroic actions,” Augustin told reporters.

US President Joe Biden cancelled a trip to Italy this week to focus on the federal response to the fires.

“We’re doing anything and everything, and as long as it takes to contain these fires,” Biden earlier told reporters.

– Climate crisis –

Having destroyed perhaps hundreds of multimillion-dollar homes, the Pacific Palisades fire looked set to be one of the costliest blazes on record.

AccuWeather said it estimated up to \$57 billion of losses.

Wildfires are part of life in the US West and play a vital role in nature.

But scientists say human-caused climate change is altering weather patterns.

Southern California had two decades of drought that were followed by two exceptionally wet years, which sparked furious vegetative growth – leaving the region packed with fuel and primed to burn – and then has had no significant rain for eight months.

AFP