



By: *Sharmila Devi*

# Will soaring heat and wildfires spur Europe to act on climate?



Soaring temperatures and extensive wildfires in southern Europe have broken so many records they have become hard to track, with Greece, Turkey, France, Slovakia and the Balkans battling blazes alongside heatwaves.

The dramatic wildfires coincided with a landmark **ruling** from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) declaring all countries have a legal obligation to protect and prevent harm to the climate.

The 23 July ruling is non-binding but it does help to clarify existing legal obligations that countries are bound by.

Will the summer heat push richer nations to act on climate change? The answer may not **come** before November's COP30 climate negotiations in Brazil.

## A "climate pact" to battle the emergency

Moral pressure to act on the climate is likely to arise in September at the Second Africa Climate **Summit** in Ethiopia, when African countries will discuss their **need** for up to \$1.9 trillion to move away from fossil fuels on a continent where nearly 600 million people still lack electricity.

In Spain, fires have burnt an area twice the size of London. For the first time, Spain requested assistance from the EU's civil protection mechanism, a firefighting force created in 2001 that has been called upon more than 16 times so far this year, more than in the whole of 2024.

**"We need a strategy that anticipates a better, more secure and more equitable response for our fellow citizens" - Pedro Sánchez**

Pedro Sánchez, Spain's prime minister, called for a "climate pact" to battle the emergency as he toured the burning regions of his country.

"We need a strategy that anticipates a better, more secure and more equitable response for our fellow citizens in the face of the worsening and accelerating effects of the climate emergency in our country," Sánchez **said**. "And that requires a great state pact that leaves the climate emergency outside of partisan struggles and ideological issues, where we focus on scientific evidence and act accordingly."

## The world's fastest-warming continent

Europe is the world's fastest-warming continent, outpacing the global average since the 1980s. The European Forest Fire Information System estimates that across Europe this summer, wildfires have **burnt** more land than in any year since 2006.

The summer heat even temporarily **shut** the Dardanelles Strait to maritime traffic due to forest fires raging in north-western Turkey on 8 August. Tourist trails closed on Mount Vesuvius near Naples because of a massive blaze on the volcano's slopes. France suffered its largest wildfire for 75 years that burned through an area larger than Paris.

Further north in the UK, firefighters **warned** on 14 August that 2025 is on track to beat the national record with 856 wildfires so far this year, six times the number recorded last year.

**The size and intensity of forest wildfires may at least slow the melting of sea ice in the Arctic**

Man-made climate change made a July heat wave in Norway, Sweden and Finland 2 degrees Celsius hotter and ten times more likely, according to a report by the World Weather Attribution group of scientists. The heat forced reindeer into cities in search of water.

The size and intensity of forest wildfires may at least slow the melting of sea ice in the Arctic

because the smoke reflects heat and cools the ground below, says analysis by the University of Washington. But the carbon released by the fires will still continue to warm the planet while exacting a toll in human and animal health.

## Planning for a new hot normal

European countries are trying to plan for what they fear is a new hot normal. France, for example, **fears** that a heat wave at 50 degrees Celsius is no longer impossible, particularly after eight of the 10 hottest summers recorded in the country since 1900 have occurred since 2015.

But only 28 countries have submitted their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) that set out a target on emissions to 2035 and which were due in February. Brazil is urging all countries to file them by September so there is time for UN assessment before November's COP30.

At preparatory climate talks in Bonn in June, it was made clear that the NDCs will not add up to the emissions cuts needed to stay within 1.5 degrees Celsius of global heating.

**There is no blueprint to deliver the \$1.3 trillion promised at COP29 by developed countries for poorer ones that are experiencing their own extreme weather**

“What we’re seeing is a gap between political signalling and policy delivery,” **said** Victoria Kalyvas of Zero Carbon Analytics. “Countries are increasingly acknowledging the need for a fossil fuel phaseout in their climate plans—but few are backing that up with timelines or structural reforms.”

Furthermore, there is no blueprint to deliver the \$1.3 trillion promised at COP29 by developed countries for poorer ones that are experiencing their own extreme weather in

the form of droughts, floods, rising seas as well as heatwaves.

## A broader energy transition

The US has absented itself from any serious debate. The journal *Nature* **said** that on 29 July, a US Department of Energy (DOE) report by a group of “contrarian” climate scientists concluded that “CO2-induced warming might be less damaging economically than commonly believed, and excessively aggressive mitigation policies could prove more detrimental than beneficial.”



*It is inevitable that we will make this broader energy transition, that it will be sustainable – Al Gore*

Nature did say that the DOE report was right in pointing out that an important uncertainty lies in our ability to predict how much global temperatures will increase as carbon emissions spew out because temperature rises are related to how cloud coverage changes over time and reflect heat from the earth's surface.

The journal called for more funding into basic research, but this seems unlikely given Washington's slashing of science budgets in recent months.

Al Gore, the former US vice-president whose career has done much to raise the dangers of a warming climate, tried to inject some optimism at an environmental meeting last weekend in Brazil. “I believe it is inevitable that we will make this broader energy transition, that it will be sustainable,” he **said** on 18

August.

“But the serious question that remains is whether we will do it in time.”