

Olympic Torching

By **COSTAS SYNOLAKIS**

August 27, 2007

The catastrophic forest fires raging in Greece, reportedly covering close to one-quarter of its land territory, have once again brought into focus the need for preparedness for natural disasters.



Overmatched: Firefighters on Mount Penteli, north of Athens, August 2007

More than 50 people have been killed by the current fires. Many burned in their cars as they were trying to flee from their villages. Greece has declared a state of emergency in all its provinces. France, Germany, Serbia, Italy, the U.S. and Russia have sent or are sending firefighters and equipment. One of the fires threatens Olympia, where all Olympic Games of antiquity were held.

Greece is paying the price for its severe lack of emergency preparedness. All of the country's forests are in mountainous areas, yet there are very few fire roads

for rapid access. There are no constant head tanks at mountain tops, tanks that store water so that there is enough pressure and capacity for firefighting. By some accounts Greece has only 1% of the minimum number of fire hydrants in its countryside. Entire islands, such as Meganisi, located between Lefkas and Kefalonia, have no firefighters, trucks or hydrants. Even in Athens, fire trucks with ladders do not fit most streets of the modern city, a problem exasperated by uncontrolled development and illegal parking.

Greece has invested heavily in firefighting aircraft. Yet watching television scenes of helicopters dropping water onto fires with fronts that are 20 kilometers long, one invariably thinks of the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dike. Practically everywhere fires rage, TV news showed agonized residents desperately pleading for fire trucks as they tried to control the blazes by carrying water with tractors and throwing buckets of water on flames three to four times their size. In one of the most moving image sequences, monks from a monastery near the most beautiful pine forest of Athens were

seen kneeling in prayer before the flames, clutching holy icons they had carried to safety from the inferno.

What Greece has not invested in is emergency preparedness -- in advanced planning with extreme scenario exercises both in IT systems and in the field. Aircraft are no substitute for ground forces and old-fashioned hydrants. Once a fire is out of control, it takes Olympian efforts from the air to quench it. Firefighting aircraft carry water; they cannot evacuate hundreds of people from so many geographically diverse locations. The assistance of army helicopters should have been sought earlier; several lives might have been saved. There has been no effective coordination, as many emergency managers at all levels are not professionals but political appointees with party credentials or family connections.

Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis has wondered aloud whether all these simultaneous fires are an accident and has promised to identify any arsonists who set or worsened the blazes. Even if some of the fires are due to arson, though, the government needs to face up to its poor response to the disaster and plan better for future crises.

Greece would be wise to look what its other European partners and the U.S. are doing. A proportion of emergency relief spending in any particular province -- roughly 5% to 10% -- should be budgeted for additional local emergency preparedness. Planning needs to be local, not coordinated by bureaucrats in Athens who are hardly familiar with local conditions and needs. Evacuation plans should be drawn for every settlement for a range of disasters. Fire roads need to be built and maintained and water storage tanks and hydrants should be installed in every mountainous area prone to large fires. Power lines should be buried, as they not only trigger fires but incredibly complicate Greece's practice of firefighting by air. Spending more in subsidies per year to bolster failing national industries than on emergency preparedness is unacceptable.

The Greeks need to realize that the defense of their homeland is no longer limited to its borders, but includes every forest, river, lake, wetland and beach threatened by natural disasters. It is time for Greeks to stop planning their infrastructure based on diminishing European handouts and the associated corruption, and instead develop their own talent, industry, science and engineering. Meritocracy in emergency planning and management is a good first step.

Mr. Synolakis is a professor of natural hazards at the Technical University of Crete and director of the Tsunami Research Center at the University of Southern California.