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Chile arrests 43 people suspected of stoking some of the forest fires

30/01/2017



Authorities in Chile have detained 43 people suspected of stoking some of the deadly forest fires that have killed 11 people and destroyed large swaths of land, according to President Michelle Bachelet.

For nearly two weeks, fires have raged across seven regions in south and central Chile, devastating more than 400,000 hectares, Ms Bachelet said in her latest update on the tragedy. She added that 43 people had been detained "for their possible responsibility in the forest fires."

Most of the suspects were apprehended in the hardest-hit regions of O'Higgins, Maule and Biobio. They could face a penalty of up to 20 years in prison.

Of the 130 active forest fires, 50 are under control while 66 others are still being battled, officials said.

The Chilean government is distributing aid to those affected by the blaze, most of whom are farmers and ranchers whose homes, animals and land has been destroyed.

More than 11,000 people are working to extinguish the fires, including members of the military, police, public officials and residents.

Of these, more than a half have come from abroad to help with what Chile has called the largest emergency operation in its history.

Fires are common in Chile's parched forests during the southern hemisphere's summer. Most are caused by human activity. But this year it has been worse than usual because of a drought attributed by environmentalists to climate change.

The fires have also turned into a competition between US and Russia's fire combat brigades with air tankers,

considered the largest in the world. The US have sent the Global Supertanker, a converted Jumbo 747 with a water capacity of 72.600 liters and a refill time of 35 minutes. The Supertanker needs an airstrip of 2.450 meters to take off.

Dieter Linneberg, representative of the Global Supertanker said that on Saturday the aircraft broke two records for a day: the five loads water dropped in critical areas and the miles flown.

Russia likewise turned up with an Ilyushin II-76 with a 49.000 liters capacity, a refill time of 12 minutes and a takeoff distance of 1.600 meters. No report had been released on Sunday on the Russian tanker.

Meanwhile it was announced that Brazil was sending two Air Force Hercules C130 with 28 fire experts that will be operating from Santiago.

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