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The burning of Greece

By E.G. Vallianatos

The Greeks already call Friday August 24, 2007 Black Friday, the day when fires all over the country started consuming forests, olive orchards, homes and, sometimes, people.

This ecological catastrophe caught the country unprepared at the peak of the tourist season. High winds and high temperatures spread the fires to large areas in Central Greece, Peloponnesos, and the large island of Euboea while, in most instances, in both towns and villages threatened by fires, there were no fire fighting equipment available. People faced the fires alone and, in the ensuing panic, more than 60 lost their lives.

Peloponnese and, especially, Elis in northwest Peloponnese, including the sacred land of ancient Olympia, suffered tremendous damage: thousands of acres of forest, brush land, and olive groves became dust, overnight wiping out the livelihoods of thousands of people and decimating the precious natural world. Fires in Elis alone killed 40 people, destroyed 350 homes, and burned about 5 million olive trees.

I listened for several hours a day for several days to the telephone calls people from all over Greece made to the hosts of the public radio station ERA 2 in Athens. Sometimes local officials reported their communities' efforts in fighting fires. However, the essence of the dozens of messages and discussion was the pain and anger Greeks felt for the loss of the natural heritage of Greece, literally the intentional burning of the country by an invisible enemy.

One Greek said: "They roasted us like fish," where "they" was understood to be local Greeks working for construction companies or foreign agents fighting a war against Greece. The mayor of Peristeri, an Athenian suburb, described the situation facing Greece as a "fiery tsunami."

No Greek government has taken nature seriously; the country has yet to develop a land registry system. More than 5 years ago, the European Union gave Greece funds for such an essential project, but nothing came of it. The result of such anomie is that arson is part of development: there are some 2

million illegal land holdings in Greece. No one knows the exact location and dimensions of the national forests. The forest service barely exists. It is under-funded with inadequate number of foresters.

For example, there are only 4 foresters for two islands, Kefhalonia and Ithake. Megalopolis, at the center of Arkadia in Peloponnesos, was surrounded by fire, but it did not have a single fire engine.

The August burning of Greece documented the deplorable, unacceptable, and dangerous situation into which the country has fallen.

Greece is a tourist nation, almost entirely devoted to serving foreigners for a few months a year; however, the country is bereft of self-sufficiency and sustainable infrastructure for the protection of nature, including forests, agriculture and agrarian life.

Greek governments' corrupt policies make it possible for gangsters, usually associated with builders and bankers, to burn national forests or parklands, which, in time, the government privatizes for apartment buildings. No Greek law exists that criminalizes such behavior.

A woman from Sparta said to me her family lost all its olive trees. What young persons, she asked, would stay or return to farming when it takes about 10 years for the new olive tree to bear fruit?

Clearly, Greece is going through an existential crisis, the most serious in its life as an independent country.

Facing and resolving this crisis will demand remaking the political and cultural life of the country. The party political system in Greece is neither Greek nor democratic. Greeks must refashion their politics to mirror their ancient democratic traditions.

Such a return to Greek democratic thought would, first of all, demand that the country reinvents itself for a livable, ecological, and political future. It is unconscionable that almost half of the Greek population inhabits Athens. Such a monstrous city is a cancer, eating the rest of the country.

Athens and other huge cities must shrink significantly. Start that process by spreading government ministries and funding to the provinces. Why are the

ministry of agriculture and the agricultural university in Athens? They would be more useful in Thessaly or Peloponnesos. Large cities impoverish the rest of the country, depriving it from resources and protection.

Rural Greece is burning primarily because it's largely abandoned.

Second, the government must fund economic and cultural activity in the countryside, keeping most of the people in rural Greece, revitalizing the country, making it self-sufficient, alive, and prosperous. The government must also strengthen laws protecting the environment and forests while passing legislation mandating a land registry and making forest fires a criminal act, eliminating all incentives that forestlands could ever become private property.

Finally, the European Union and the United States ought to help Greece build its fire-fighting infrastructure and assist in the mapping of the country's forests.

E.G. Vallianatos is the author of "This Land is Their Land" and "The Passion of the Greeks."