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Protection Prevention Preparedness Response Resilience Recovery



CASCADING RISKS

EVOLVING OUR UNDERSTANDING

Climate & Weather | Society & Resilience
| Leadership & Continuity | Terrorism &
Security | Focus on Australia

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Gracie Broom

comment

Cascading risks are, of course, not a new concept, but we make no apology for the emblematic reminder on our front cover.



Coupled with compound risks – “physical components in the environmental domain” – many parts of the world are experiencing their devastating manifestations in real life. We are witnessing wildfires, heatwaves, flooding, disruption, discontent and geopolitical calamity, continually stalked by the malignant shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic.

All represent individual and societal tragedies; many involve extreme weather, but these cannot be blamed on ‘climate’ alone. As Milad Zamanifar says on p18, if the role of climate is emphasised in these disasters, then the: “Valid argument about the roles of policymakers and authorities in inducing a disaster might become obscured.” Political expedience, inaction or feet dragging often make a disaster worse, but it is simply easier to place the blame on climate.

Complacency is also a peril, as examined within the context of terrorism on p72 and p74. Threat fatigue and the psychological difficulty of maintaining perpetual vigilance mean that warning signs can – and have been – missed.

Are there any solutions? On p12 Gianluca Pescaroli says that this could all be the last call to shift away from the traditional approach based on single threats or drivers and outlines the benefits of stress testing. On p60 Eric McNulty reminds us that we need a mindset purpose-built for the pervasive ambiguity and tumult that will define the coming decades. And Jenifer Hesterman notes that scenario planning and extending our imaginations are essential (p8).

Mindsets must, indeed, shift, particularly with regard to societies and resilience. If programmes are imposed upon communities without them actively being involved in their leadership and formation, then they are likely to fail or, worse, cause long-lasting damage.

We also need to be wary of an impending sense of nihilism that seems to be infecting wide tranches of the world. And this means genuine empowerment, somehow uniting ruptured communities and re-establishing trust in leadership.



The President of Cyprus described the fires as a 'tragedy'

Kalina Christodoulou | Shutterstock

Wildfires in Cyprus

As a journalist, **Anna Averkiou** has reported on disasters around the world. But she could only watch with a sense of helplessness and fear when she realised that fires were burning out of control in Cyprus and heading towards the mountain village where many of her relatives live. Here, she speaks to a fire officer who was involved with the response

Avgoustinos Chatziyiannis, fire manager with the British Forces Cyprus' Defence Fire and Rescue Service, admits he is still finding it difficult to describe the experience: "I've been in the job for the last 16 years and attended many wildfires, small and large, both while on duty and as a volunteer. However, I have never come across such a merciless fire. It was the most challenging of my life. "There was an atmosphere of sheer terror. Everything around you was burning or was ready to ignite, and then you see a fast-moving wall of flame coming towards you," he recalls, explaining how a field full of olive trees: "Seemed to vaporise in a blink of a moment," from an LPG explosion in a house engulfed by flames. "There's nothing that can prepare firefighters for such scenarios. There's no training adequate or realistic enough

to prepare first responders to deal with such a chaotic situation – but this is what we have signed up for," he says.

Cyprus was in the grip of a severe heatwave when the fire began at 13:50 hrs in the Limassol village of Arakapas, in the southern foothills of the Troodos mountains. Avgoustinos recounts: "I was coming from the capital, Nicosia, around midday with my family when we came across aerial and ground assets trying to contain a fire just off the outskirts of Limassol.

"We stopped in a safe area, well away from the operations, in order for the children to see what takes place during a wildfire and the destruction it causes. With my wife and I both working for fire services, it was an opportunity to teach them about the dangers of fire.

"I was unaware that 25 km away, another fire had started that eventually caused the deaths of four people

and destroyed an area of 55 km². But as we left the first fire and continued along the motorway, I saw the other blaze and I knew it would be like nothing we had faced before. The heatwave over the previous week and very little rain since April, strong winds, a heavily-fuelled area and the erratic topography of the Arakapas region amounted to an equation for destruction."

Like many off-duty firefighters, Avgoustinos knew he was going to offer his services to help fight the fire. He grabbed his PPE and set off for the fireground, hearing on local news reports that communities were already being evacuated owing to the magnitude of the blaze.

As expected for an incident of this scale, when he arrived at the scene all the local emergency services were in attendance – Police, Fire Service, Forestry Department, Civil Defence and the Provincial Administration, as well as volunteer groups – using all available means to contain the fire. The electricity authority reported power outages in the region as the fire consumed large numbers of electricity poles which, in turn, deactivated water pumps, making the firefighting operations even more difficult.

"I went to see the Senior Fire Officer on the ground to ask how I could help. Although I work for a different fire service, the excellent collaboration between our services over the years meant I knew many of the officers there. He told me to support the urban firefighting operations around the area.

"At that time most residents had been evacuated from the area – a task that lies with civil defence – but some decided to stay to protect their properties. It is crucial for citizens to follow the instructions given by the authorities to enable them to do their job without adding more weight upon their shoulders," Avgoustinos comments.

"As I ran to reach the area of operations, I saw houses burned to the ground and firefighters trying to save what could be saved. One would have thought that the fire would only engulf houses on the outskirts of the villages and near the main fire fronts, but this was not the case. Some houses were set alight by embers – wind driven flying particles that can fly hundreds of metres, erratically spreading the fire well away from the main fire fronts."

Avgoustinos joined a fire crew of three that was advancing in various directions. He says the closer they got to the head of the fire, the more the destruction was evident, with scorched land, homes destroyed and people and animals fleeing. He is keen to stress that many houses were saved that day by the emergency services and by the: "Brave, men and women who were facing an impossible task."

Cyprus also activated the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, requesting support to tackle the blazes and the EU's emergency Copernicus satellite provided damage assessment maps of the affected areas. National Firefighting Plan Ikaros 2 was initiated and more than ten firefighting aircraft were mobilised with help from British Forces in Cyprus, Greece, Israel and Italy, including RAF Akrotiri, one of the British bases on Cyprus, to refuel and replenish.

While still shocked by the magnitude and impact of the fire, Avgoustinos is not surprised. "I'm no oracle and I don't possess any special powers, but I've been following, tweeting and talking about global developments about wildfires for years and have read a myriad of literature from the scientific community about how

climate crisis and human intervention contribute to this new type of landscape fire – also called megafires.

"Record breaking temperatures, record breaking fires and never-before seen phenomena are causing havoc at a global level, but most frequently in the USA, Australia, Spain, Greece, Portugal and Siberia, with the list going on and on.

"We must strive to adapt with this new regime and start living with fires instead of considering them sworn enemies," he continues.

Avgoustinos has been collaborating with Pyrolife, a European Horizon2020-funded programme that facilitates the advancement of holistic, integrated wildfire management in Europe and globally, and the European University's Centre of Excellence.

As regular readers of the *CRJ* know, the scientific community has been warning for years of the imperative for significant steps to be taken in order to engage communities as the basic component towards a realistic management of landscape fires – especially those within areas prone to such incidents.

Defensible spaces need to be created and maintained around properties, along with raising awareness among citizens and educating them on how to prevent and prepare for landscape fires.

Increasing wildfire resilience

Avgoustinos and other fire professionals are calling for a single organisation to be responsible for co-ordinating these efforts by emergency and other stakeholders and to ensure that fires are managed holistically to increase wildfire resilience in Cyprus in a sustainable manner.

At the time of writing, Cyprus has been dealing with more fires as the heatwave continues into August. In addition, fires are raging in neighbouring Greece and Turkey.

President of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, who described the fire as a: "Tragedy," promised no-one would be left abandoned in the wake of the fire's destruction. The Government has responded with a €6 million aid package, which includes compensation for families of the four Egyptian workers who were killed, financial aid for fruit and vegetable farmers, help with rebuilding homes and business premises and financial assistance with education expenses for the children of those affected. A national appeal for food and clothing and other items, as well as financial help, attracted a huge response.

The fire was not fully extinguished until around 08:00 hrs the following Monday. Incredibly, for my family, the wind direction changed and the fire stopped just below their village, Vavatsinia.

Although well-established olive groves and farmland have been lost, everyone there was safe.

However, the devastation and losses in the surrounding villages and forest will take years to recover from and, as Avgoustinos says, will never be forgotten. CRJ

Author



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