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## Death Toll Climbs in Australia Fires

By **MERAIAH FOLEY**

SYDNEY — Australian officials said Monday that some of the wildfires that killed at least 173 people, destroyed whole towns and left hundreds homeless in southern [Australia](#) over the weekend may have been deliberately set.

The police declared huge tracks of land across the southern state of Victoria crime scenes on Monday, and announced the creation of a task force to hunt suspected arsonists, who could face murder charges if arrested.

Australia's prime minister, [Kevin Rudd](#), said in an television interview on Monday that the arsonists were guilty of "mass murder."

The wildfires tore through towns and homes in an area northeast of Melbourne on Saturday, fanned by winds of more than 62 miles per hour and temperatures that reached 117 degrees. Wildfires have been burning across Victoria for weeks, but the record temperatures combined with the most severe drought in the country's history have created what experts said were the worst fire conditions ever seen in Australia.

Thousands of firefighters continued to battle blazes in Victoria on Monday, and the premier of the state said he would review the emergency response to the fires, which destroyed several towns and at least 750 homes in the area of once tranquil mountain towns. Many of those displaced have been left with nothing.

Most of the damage in Victoria was wrought by a 60-mile-long blaze that razed the village of Kinglake to the ground and destroyed several other small villages nearby.

Thomas Libreri, a home builder in Kinglake, said his first warning was the roar of flames coming over a ridge toward his house.

"I heard the noise, and then I had about 20 seconds to react," Mr. Libreri told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. on Monday. Most of the homes on his block were destroyed within minutes, he said. Mr. Libreri said he and a neighbor grabbed a man who had suffered severe burns and threw him into a swimming pool — then waited six hours for rescue teams to arrive.

Police tape encircled the wreckage of several houses in the tiny town of Strathewen, where 30 of the town's 200 people were thought to have died in the blaze, according to a reporter from [The Age](#) newspaper who toured the site with a fire official.

The Victoria State police commissioner, Christine Nixon, said the process of removing and identifying the dead could take days because the police were treating each death as a potential homicide.

"This will take some time," Ms. Nixon told reporters on Monday. "It is a complex matter, and we must be accurate."

Australians are no strangers to wildfires or bush fires. Every summer, thousands of fires burn across this hot, dry continent, and there are not enough firefighters to protect every home. Many rural Australians know that it is only a matter of time before they, or someone they know, will face a stark choice: evacuate or stay and fight the fires.

Fire authorities across Australia advise residents who choose to defend their homes to stay indoors while the blaze passes through. Citing statistics from past fires, the agencies say that most people can survive a wildfire as long as they avoid direct contact with the searing temperatures and scalding gases that come with an advancing fire.

However, many of the residents caught up in the Victoria blazes had no time for an orderly escape, and some were killed when the houses they were sheltering in collapsed around them.

Victoria's premier, John Brumby, said the government would set up a commission to examine the emergency response and review the longstanding policy of advising residents to "stay and defend or leave early."

"People will want to review that, examine that," he told local radio on Monday. "There is no question that there were people who did everything right, put in place their fire plan and it wouldn't matter, their house was just incinerated."

The deadly firestorms and heat in the south revived discussions in Australia of whether human-caused [global warming](#) was contributing to the continent's climate woes of late — including recent prolonged drought in some places and severe flooding last week in Queensland that drove snakes into houses.

Climate scientists say that no single rare event like the deadly heat wave or fires can be blamed on global warming, but the chances of experiencing such conditions are rising along with the temperature. In 2007, Australia's national science agency published a 147-page report on projected climate changes, concluding, among other things, that "high-fire-danger weather is likely to increase in the southeast."

The flooding in the northeast and the combustible conditions in the south were both consistent with what is forecast as a result of recent shifts in Southern Hemisphere climate patterns linked to rising concentrations of greenhouse gases, said Kevin Trenberth, a scientist at the United States [National Center for Atmospheric Research](#).

Bob Brown, the leader of the Australian Greens Party, said the fires were "a sobering reminder of the need for this nation and the whole world to act and put at a priority our need to tackle climate change."

*Andrew C. Revkin contributed reporting from New York.*

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