

Tennessee Wildfires: 'The Worst Is Definitely Over With'

Local officials said on Tuesday that "the worst is over" for two small Tennessee resort towns in the Great Smoky Mountains where wildfires killed four people, destroyed or damaged more than 100 homes, forced thousands to flee and threatened country music star Dolly Parton's theme park, Dollywood.

The flames, driven to the outskirts of Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge overnight by hurricane-force winds and fed by drought-parched brush, forced 14,000 people to flee and sent three to hospitals with severe burns, the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency said.

Four people were killed in the wildfires, the agency said, and a total of 14 people injured. No further details were immediately available on the fatalities.

While downtown Gatlinburg was untouched by the flames, heavy smoke and an orange sky hung overhead as motorists packed roads in an attempt to leave town.

"I can tell you that we've all been overwhelmed at the scene of destruction in the county and primarily in the city of Gatlinburg," Sevier County Mayor Larry Waters told reporters at a press conference.

Gatlinburg Mayor Mike Werner said that about half of the town of some 3,000 people, known as the "gateway to the Great Smoky Mountains," had been affected by the blazes.

Gatlinburg Fire Chief Greg Miller said the so-called Chimney Top fire exploded on Monday evening as humidity dropped and wind gusts reached nearly 90 miles per hour.

"I can tell you this, whatever we deal with today is not gonna be anything like what we dealt with last night. The worst is definitely over with," Miller said at the news conference.

It was not immediately clear how many people were ordered from Pigeon Forge, which includes Dollywood's 150-acre () spread of rides and other attractions.

The theme park said it would suspend operations on Wednesday because of the wildfires, and Great Smoky Mountains National Park officials said all of the park's facilities were closed because of extensive fire activity and downed trees.

"I have been watching the terrible fires in the Great Smoky Mountains and I am heartbroken," Parton said in a written statement.

"My thoughts and prayers are with the great people of Tennessee during these terrible wildfires. Stay safe!" President-elect Donald Trump said in a post on Twitter.

Vice President-elect Mike Pence told reporters that Trump had spoken to Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam to express the incoming administration's concern and offer their prayers.

About 12,000 homes and businesses were left without power in the area and some 2,000 people sought refuge in shelters, officials said. Downed power lines and fallen trees sparked several smaller fires, local media reported.

Members of the state's National Guard have been called in to assist first responders.

Firefighters have battled dozens of wildfires across the U.S. Southeast in recent weeks.

"It's the apocalypse on both sides" of the city's center, volunteer Fire Department Lieutenant Bobby Balding told local 9News. {eoa}

