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Britain bakes, Europe burns. Is this proof of global warming?

By Michael McCarthy,
Environment Editor

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If it isn't proof of global warming at last, it certainly looks like it. As much of Europe burns like a furnace and rivers run dry across the continent, Britain is bracing itself for its own record temperature.

Sometime tomorrow, in southern England or the Midlands, the mercury in the thermometer may pass 37.1C, which became the national record when registered in Cheltenham on 3 August 1990. That centigrade peak translates as 98.8 Fahrenheit, so the remarkable figure for Britain of 99 or even 100F- is on the cards.

"We reckon there's a 20 per cent chance it will happen, but in any case it's going to get very very close," said Andy Yeatman of the Met Office.

A record would be hugely significant - a three-figure Fahrenheit temperature for the UK would be breaking psychological as well as new meteorological ground as it would give many people for the first time the perception that global warming is a real, not a theoretical phenomenon - and that it is happening to them.

If we do see a record, and possibly 100F, meteorological scientists will not directly attribute it to climate change - natural climate variability is too great for a single heat episode to be put down to global warming. But they will certainly say it is in line with what global warming is predicted to produce by complex mathematical models of the Earth's climate run on supercomputers.


And even if the record is not quite breached, Britain's weather services are agreed that tomorrow temperatures will be in the upper 30s Centigrade (or the high 90s Fahrenheit), certainly hitting 35-36C (95-97F). These are temperatures that, in the past, have been reached only a few times per century, and in anticipation, temporary speed restrictions were imposed yesterday on some of Britain's busiest rail routes for fear of

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rails buckling in the heat. Long-distance Virgin routes from London to the Midlands and the North will be most affected, with a 60mph limit imposed by Network Rail along the west coast main line from Euston to Crewe and the cross-country network.

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Individuals should be equally careful. Don't plan anything strenuous, put sunscreen on the children and keep your bottled water handy. Britain will bake.

It has been coming for weeks. Across Europe, an unending episode of unprecedented heat has this summer reduced major rivers to a trickle in Italy, turned southern France into an inferno of forest fires and sent people in Germany to their deaths from heatstroke. Only the Atlantic westerly winds have kept the burning air from Britain - and now the winds are blowing from the south-east, and blowing the heat our way.

But what a contrast, in central and Eastern Europe, with just a year ago. Then the problems were not heat and drought - they were torrential downpours and flooding.

As two depressions came together last August and dumped a deluge of biblical proportions over southern Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria and Hungary, the region's great rivers burst their banks and drowned more than 100 people amid millions of pounds worth of damage. The two jewel cities of *Mittleuropa*, Dresden and Prague, were inundated as the Elbe and the Vltava overflowed, and only its high flood defence walls saved Budapest as the Danube rose nearly 10 metres. (This year it is, in places, only a metre deep).

However, Europe's record soaking summer of 2002 and its record baking summer of 2003 do not cancel each other out in terms of indicating global warming - just the opposite.

Both are in line with one of the key features predicted for climate change, if levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), keep going up - more extreme weather occurs.

"They are both consistent with what the computer models of the climate are saying will become more frequent, if CO₂ levels continue to rise," said Simon Brown, who is in charge of researching extreme events at the Met Office's Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research.

Higher temperatures mean the air could hold more moisture, Dr Brown said, so even in a dry summer, when rain falls, it could be much heavier.

Five weeks ago, in an unprecedented announcement, the World Meteorological Organisation signalled weather extremes were being recorded all across the world, from Switzerland's hottest-ever June to a record month for tornadoes in the US - and linked them to global warming directly.

No one can prove it. But as you swelter in the heat today, you should realise the evidence is stacking up.

Portugal

Portugal declared a state of national disaster yesterday after the worst spate of forest fires in more than two decades killed nine people, torched thousands of hectares of tinder-dry forest and destroyed scores of homes, *writes Tim Gaynor*.

The emergency declaration allowed more than €100m (£70m) in aid to be released. The funds will go to people who have lost their jobs and homes, farmers who have lost crops and livestock, and to local councils so that they can begin rebuilding infrastructure.

Emergency services in Lisbon said the fires, which came after weeks without rain, had hit 15 of the country's 18 regions. Almost 3,000 firefighters, 380 troops, 781 fire engines, 23 helicopters and 12 water-carrying planes were deployed to fight the blazes, which were fanned by strong winds.

The wildfires were raging mostly in the central region near Castelo Branco, about 120 miles north-east of Lisbon, where the hills are covered with pine forests.

Rescue workers said nine people had died in the past week, including a fireman who was killed when a fire engine crashed. So far this year there have been about 1,700 wild fires in the country, destroying more than 26,000 hectares of scrub and trees.

As the temperature rose to more than 40C, rail services were halted and roads were cut off in some regions.

SPAIN

Emergency services evacuated hundreds of residents from villages and farmhouses in central and south-west Spain yesterday, *writes Tim Gaynor*, as high winds and record temperatures fanned summer fires into roaring blazes that scorched thousands of hectares of woodland.

Hundreds of firefighters and volunteers battled blazes in the province of Avila, north-west of Madrid, after a separate fire in the region of Extremadura bordering Portugal, which destroyed 1,000 hectares (2,470 acres) of woodland and led to the evacuation of 750 people, was brought under control.

Emergency services in Avila said the blaze was raging along a front 80 kilometres wide across 5,000 hectares of woodland.

Further fires, whipped up by strong winds and record temperatures above 40C (104F) in much of the country, also burned over the weekend in the western Andalusian province of Huelva and in Ciudad Real in the central La Mancha plains. The temperatures in many towns and cities are the highest since records began.

FRANCE

As temperatures and ozone levels hit new peaks in France yesterday, the happiest beasts were 27 polar bears slurping mackerel-flavoured iced lollies at a zoo near Paris, *writes Alex Duval Smith*. The worst off, after police enforced reduced speed limits to cut pollution, were holidaymakers stuck in their cars.

Meteo France said the coolest thing for humans to do, at least until Thursday, would be to carry out important business at daybreak when temperatures could fall as low as 20C. Yesterday, Clermont-Ferrand in the south recorded 43C at midday.

The weather forecasting centre said the combination of high temperatures and heavy traffic last weekend had compounded the pollution. Ozone counts reached peak levels, including in traditionally temperate cities such as Le Havre and Reims. In Provence, sulphur dioxide levels reached their highest rates this year.

While the bears at Thoiry Zoo near Versailles were cooling themselves with mackerel frozen into ice, efforts at France's nuclear power stations to keep temperatures down met with controversy.

The Green Party said Fessenheim nuclear power station in Alsace - where a temperature of 48C was recorded outside the reactor last week - should be immediately shut. The party denounced what it called the "irresponsible attitude" of Electricité de France in using a giant water cannon to cool the outer shell of the plant. The Greens also warned that the falling level of the Loire had increased the radioactivity of cooling water pumped into the river from the Villerest reactor.

After a weekend of record holiday traffic, police in Paris and Bouches-du-Rhône reduced the motorway speed limit to 100kph (60mph).

ITALY

In Italy the priests have asked their congregations to pray for rain, *writes Hugh MacLeod*.

With the river Po in the north nearly eight metres (24ft) below its normal levels and still dropping, and the national grid issuing a warning of possible blackouts, officials are on the point of declaring a state of emergency in the north.

Plans are being drawn up to pump water from Alpine lakes and dams into the river Po, which is at its lowest level for 100 years.

Temperatures in Rome have been hitting 35C for weeks, forcing tourists to cool off in the Trevi fountain - and pay a fine for doing so.

Agricultural groups say farmers have lost about €5bn worth of crops, and the price of some fruit and vegetables has gone up as a result of the drought.

In southern Italy, where lack of water has become a serious problem, large areas of scrubland were destroyed by fires raging in Calabria and Salento in the region of Apulia.

Fire broke out on Mount Vesuvius but it was reported to have been extinguished at the weekend.

Italy's national grid, GRTN, said there may be power blackouts today due to high demand and problems with the supply of electricity. Italy has suffered power cuts in recent weeks as temperatures have soared.

A GRTN official said the grid estimated 2,000 megawatts of demand more than had been expected, and reduced capacity at some power plants may make it necessary to cut power.

GERMANY

This time last year the weather in Germany was the opposite of what it is now. August 2002 brought the worst floods to hit the country in more than 100 years, *writes Ruth Elkins.*

A year on, Germany's media is remembering the tragedy, which cost 11 lives and caused €9.1bn in damage. Now Germany swelters in up to 40C and 95 per cent humidity. They are the highest temperatures in Germany since 1976, the German weather service says.

Dresden's train station, famously pictured under water at the height of the floods last year, is now a tangle of train lines on parched grass. Temperatures in Berlin soared to over 35C at the weekend and the city's lakeside beaches were packed with people trying to cool off.

But Germany's heat wave has also brought its own disasters. "Berlin cooks", screamed the city's tabloid *BZ*'s front page on yesterday. The newspaper reported the deaths of four Berliners due to the extreme heat, including two pensioners who died driving.

The paper also told of Berlin caretaker Bernd K who died after chasing two teenagers he suspected of trying to break into a flat. "The heat wave, the excitement, it was too much for the 49-year-old," the paper wrote.

Many Germans may hope for a *Hitzefrei*, or "heatwave off", a rule that allows workers and schoolchildren to go home if temperatures rise too high and it becomes too uncomfortably, or dangerously, hot to stay at their desks.

REST OF EUROPE

Even Sweden hasn't escaped the blazes which have been sweeping Europe for the past week, reporting a series of bush fires along its north-eastern coast, *writes Hugh Macleod.*

Across the continent, gusting winds are fanning the flames through tinder-dry forests and crops.

In Greece, dozens of holidaymakers and residents were evacuated early last week from properties near the Corinth canal as flames threatened the area, while the worst fires in 15 years burned outside the Croatian city of Dubrovnik.

In neighbouring Slovenia, about 500 firefighters were fighting the biggest fire in a decade near the Italian border.

Many parts of Switzerland have banned open fires completely while the levels of the Danube fell to their lowest in more than a century in Serbia and Montenegro, making the river unnavigable for barges.

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