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## Holocaust of the elderly: death toll in French heatwave rises to 10,000

By **John Lichfield** in Paris

22 August 2003

The summer of 2003 will be remembered as the year of the holocaust of the French elderly.

France was reeling yesterday from figures that suggested some 10,000 people - mostly over the age of 75 - were killed by this month's heatwave, double the previous estimate.

As a political storm raged over blame for the deaths, President Jacques Chirac called an emergency cabinet meeting and promised an inquiry to examine "with complete openness" the failings of the health and welfare system.

Half the victims are believed to have died in old people's homes, many operating with fewer staff during the August holidays. Many hospitals had closed complete wards for the month and were unable to offer sophisticated, or sometimes even basic, treatment to victims. About 2,000 people are thought to have died in their homes from the effects of dehydration and other heat-related problems while neighbours and relatives were away.

Such was the death rate - described officially as a period of "surplus mortality" - that families are now having to wait for up to two weeks for a funeral because of a shortage of coffins, priests and grave-diggers.


M. Chirac, who has been criticised for refusing to break off his two-week holiday in Quebec, promised in a nationwide address yesterday that "everything will be done to correct the shortcomings" exposed by the disaster. "Many fragile people died alone in their homes," he admitted.

Senior health officials have claimed ministers reacted slowly to warnings in early August that a calamity was in the making, while the Health Minister, Jean-François Mattei, has insisted he was not given adequate advice. By the time he and the Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin,

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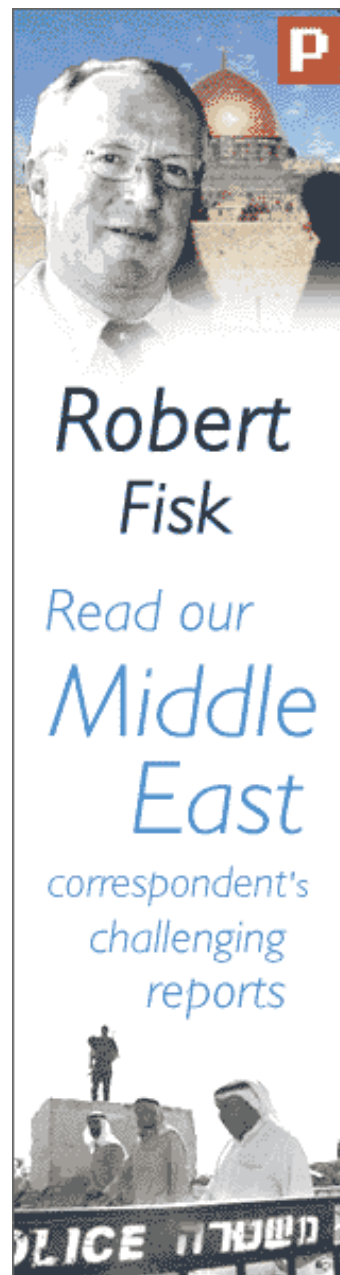
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broke off holidays last week and ordered the emergency recall of hospital staff, the worst of the 10-day heatwave was over. Earlier this week, the director general of health, Lucien Abenheim, resigned, complaining ministers had ignored his warnings, including a plea that military and Red Cross hospitals should be commandeered to ease the burden on state hospitals.

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Many healthcare professionals - including the doctor, former health minister and founder of *Médécins Sans Frontières*, Bernard Kouchner - said it had been a disaster waiting to happen. "We are all to blame," Dr Kouchner said, irritating many of his colleagues on the left, who had hoped the crisis would help them to destabilise the centre-right government and head off health reforms planned this autumn.

Dr Michel Dèsmaizieres, an emergency service doctor in Paris, told the newspaper *Libération*: "It is just not right to see [patients on] trolleys in the corridors, while whole wards were empty and locked up. In the retirement homes there were people with a body temperature of 42C [108F], for whom we could offer nothing but a little comfort."

M. Mattei, also a former doctor, reluctantly admitted earlier this week that as many as 5,000 extra deaths were recorded - 80 per cent of them old people - in the first half of this month. However, France's largest funeral directors' association has now calculated that there were at least 10,000 extra deaths in the period up to Wednesday of this week, many of them on 12 August when temperatures peaked at more than 100F (37.8C) in northern France. About half the extra deaths were in the Paris area.

Government officials described these figures as "plausible" but urged caution until an official investigation was completed next month.

Dr Marc Harboun, a specialist geriatrics from Ivry, near Paris, said: "This death rate is due to a lack of people and means to reduce the temperature [of the patients]. Medically, we could cope by increasing the dosage in transfusions but, for the other things we needed to do - making the patients drink, dampening them down - we didn't have the time."

Officials said 85 per cent of all public and private retirement homes in France were permanently understaffed. At holiday times, staffing levels fell even further.

One woman, Claude Guérin, described how she took her elderly aunt to a hospital on the Côte d'Azur, suffering from pulmonary problems brought on by the heat. "She was 96, but she was fighting fit before the heatwave," said Mme Guérin.

"At first she was put in an air-conditioned revival room but then she was abruptly transferred to a ward where it was 50C [122F]. I talked to two nurses. One said: 'I don't have time to bother with her.' The other said: 'Get her out of here.' But the doctors would not let her go. Three days later, she died."

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