

# Community spirit drives volunteer firefighters in Portugal

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Hugo Simoes talks on the radio while coordinating a group of volunteer firefighters from Lisbon, Portugal. The firefighters were helping fight a forest fire near the village of Aldeia do Monte on August 10, 2017. Photo from: AP.

This summer, 2,000 Portuguese firefighters battled a deadly, weeklong wildfire that killed 64 people. Besides facing serious danger, these firefighters had something in common: they were doing it for no pay.

Over 90 percent of Portugal's firefighters are volunteers. From lawyers to construction workers, they take time off work to risk their lives. The volunteer fire departments where they work need donated money to pay for their equipment.

During the summer fire season, firefighters are often sent to fires far from their homes. Then the government pays these brave men and women \$2 an hour. The volunteer firefighters usually give the money to their fire departments.

## **Sense Of Duty Pushes Volunteers**

Hugo Simoes is a 33-year-old bombeiro, or firefighter. In June, he was sent to the country's deadliest wildfire. He says a sense of duty and brotherhood drives the volunteers. "We do it out of community spirit," he says.

Volunteer firefighters are not uncommon in Europe and beyond. More than 97 percent of German firefighters are volunteers. In the United States that figure is around 70 percent. But in Portugal, these volunteer services are the front line in emergencies. There are just seven paid fire departments in the country.

### **Cultural Tradition**

Simoes works for Portugal's oldest fire department, the Bombeiros Voluntarios de Lisboa. It was created in 1868 in the capital city of Lisbon. For him, the volunteer spirit shown by generations of firefighters is not remarkable. It's a cultural tradition.

"Here in Portugal it's been like this for a long time," he shrugs. "We like what we do. On hot days when we could go to the beach, we come here to the fire department instead."

Simoes works full-time doing administrative work at the fire department. He earns around \$700 a month.

In June, there was a huge blaze about 90 miles north of Lisbon in Pedrogao Grande. Simoes set off with four vehicles and their crews.

"Some walked out of work and risked being marked as absent," Simoes says. Across the country, other volunteer firefighters did the same.

### **Summer Is The Time For Wildfires**

The Pedrogao Grande blaze grew because of hot weather, strong winds and dry woods. The fire spread quickly and trapped people in their cars when they tried to escape.

"The stress, the adrenaline, the heat — they demand a huge effort," Simoes said. "At times it can get a bit hairy, but our training kicks in."

Similar scenes play out every summer in Portugal. Giant flames make the firefighters look tiny. Huge clouds of smoke stretch to the horizon. Locals help out with buckets and garden hoses and try to stop the flames with broken-off tree branches. Wildfires race through eucalyptus and pine forests that are uncleared and tightly packed.

This year has been particularly bad, due to a severe drought. Portugal is one of 28 countries in the European Union. But the wildfires in Portugal caused more than one-third of the burnt forest of the European Union.

Last week, Simoes and his team were sent to a major forest fire near Pedrogao Grande. Firefighters had the blaze under control within 48 hours.

### **Donating Food And Water**



The volunteer firefighters are seen as heroes in Portugal. A recent fundraising effort called them "heroes without capes." The people of Portugal happily donate large amounts of food and water to help the firefighters.

About 80 people are on call at the Bombeiros Voluntarios de Lisboa. They receive more than 300 hours of training, which is also done outside their day jobs.

Simoes says the department has always had enough workers, though it is stretched in emergencies. It has just enough money. Fire suits cost over \$2,000 each. The recent purchase of 100 new helmets cost \$33,000.

Portugal's volunteer fire departments often buy used vehicles. In Lisbon, that includes a fire truck purchased in Luxembourg. A new one costs almost \$300,000 — way too expensive for the department. Their dream, they confide, is to own a big American fire truck.



## Quiz

- 1 Based on the information in the article, which of the following is TRUE?
- (A) Portugal is the only country with volunteer firefighters.
  - (B) Volunteer firefighters are called bombeiros in Portugal.
  - (C) Volunteer firefighters can make a salary after 300 hours of training.
  - (D) Portugal does not typically have fires throughout the year.
- 2 Select the sentence from the article that BEST supports the idea that fires spread more quickly in the summer.
- (A) During the summer fire season, firefighters are often sent to fires far from their homes.
  - (B) The Pedrogao Grande blaze grew because of hot weather, strong winds and dry woods.
  - (C) The fire spread quickly and trapped people in their cars when they tried to escape.
  - (D) The people of Portugal happily donate large amounts of food and water to help the firefighters.
- 3 Which of the following are TWO main ideas from the article?
- 1. Volunteer firefighters usually get in trouble for leaving their jobs to help fight fires.*
- 1. Volunteer firefighters do not get paid but do the job to help the community.*
- 2. Fire departments have to buy used vehicles to help fight fires.*
- 3. Volunteer firefighters are important to the country of Portugal.*
- (A) 1 and 2
  - (B) 2 and 3
  - (C) 1 and 3
  - (D) 2 and 4
- 4 What's the MAIN goal of the article?
- (A) to raise money for the volunteer firefighters
  - (B) to explain why people volunteer to be firefighters
  - (C) to describe how firefighters are different from country to country
  - (D) to understand the life of volunteer firefighters in Portugal