

## Politics versus forests



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Possessing just one fire-fighting airplane, the Republic leaves everything to luck

I can think of few organisations, which love and enjoy the forests of Cyprus more than the Cyprus Strollers. It is, therefore, perhaps an obligation to voice some thoughts and feelings resultant from the fires which burned an area of forest in excess of 15 km<sup>2</sup> last week. Post-fire, discussion focuses on identifying and punishing the culprits, and on reforestation. Is that enough?

When we take a closer look at the situation, several more aspects for examination emerge. Forests are a country's national treasure, and for Cyprus especially, their preservation ought to be a matter of high priority, given our reliance on tourism. Nevertheless, our preparedness to pre-empt and fight fires leaves much to be desired.

Possessing just one fire-fighting airplane, the Republic leaves everything to luck, wishing that when a large fire strikes, our neighbouring countries will not be fighting fires of their own.

Further, the body of forestry personnel was left understaffed, and led to regular hours work only, because overtime pay was disallowed. The consequence on 19 June was a significant delay in the critical initial response.

The counter argument came from officials arguing costs. Of course, staffing comes at a cost; there is a price to pay for the unenviable job of, for example, spending the hot days of summer on watch towers in the forests, looking out for the first sign of fire. Finance officials are ex-



**THE** Troodos forest fire was one of the worst in recent years

perts at calculating the burden of temporary recruitments and overtime pay, but are they putting all factors into the equation?

What is the cost of a burned forest? The consequent loss of tourism income? The cost of impact on citizens' health from a downgraded environment? The cost of managing soil erosion and reforestation? The cost of mobilising foreign fire-fighters? The financial equation ought to include all above elements to be complete, and one must not omit the loss of two lives, for which there is no cost tag.

We are talking here about a financial balance sheet, which ought to be drawn not merely with the

narrow scope of an accountant, but by broadening the perspective to put calculations against such elements, which determine our social well-being. Now, this is a just criterion for telling a good from a bad government, don't you agree?

Am I being too strict on the government? Shouldn't one consider the heat wave at a steady 41°C throughout this disaster? This thought leads to the wisdom of having in place proactive and reactive plans, for every level of severity. Such plans describe the coordination necessary between cooperating departments, an area surely the government needs to revisit.

It is also important to distinguish

between a physical disaster and an incident we label as wrath of God. The difference between the two is the frequency or rarity of emergence; in the case of a heat wave, temperatures of 41°C or 50°C. We should not claim excuses, when the Troodos fires happened in temperatures we experience every summer and also when the disaster was a forest fire, of which we have seen so many, in Cyprus. I shiver at the thought of what might happen in the event of a tsunami, following a quake...

The day after includes also the need for a new programme of fire pre-emption. This must have two legs, one educational, the other punitive. While there are numerous warning signs along the mountain roads, it is time for creation of a new advertising campaign, matching the standards and aesthetics of today. Pre-emption need to cover exact rules concerning the lighting of clandestine fires, by villagers or souvla lovers.

This writer has vivid memories of the inferno which burnt a vast area of the forest on Parnitha, the mountain above Athens, in 2007. It was so painful, that it took me two years, to find the courage to go climbing again on Parnitha. I was with my son, then 13. As we walked, what met the eye was the sight of dead trees all around. The only comforting view was when we turned our eyes to the ground; there, grass and wild flowers had come to life again, enough to bring a smile back. Let us not despair, life does go on, but we pray to come out wiser.