



The New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, casts her ballot in Auckland on Saturday. — AP

Clark wins second term

Australia & New Zealand

WELLINGTON (NEW ZEALAND), JULY 27. New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, clinched a historic second term at elections today, buoyed by a strong economy that helped her South Pacific country to sail largely unscathed through the global slump. *110-19 2012*

"I am pleased to say that I will be able to form a Labor-led government for a second term," Ms. Clark said to roars from supporters in her northern stronghold of Auckland.

"I am confident that tonight's result delivers New Zealand another stable strong government," she added.

Gains by small parties mean Ms. Clark will try to form a minority coalition government with the left-leaning Progressive Coalition.

With 98 per cent of the vote counted, Labor was heading for 52 seats in the 120-seat Parliament, up three from the last election. The Progressive Coalition was expected to win just two seats.

Ms. Clark is the first New Zealand woman to win back-to-back elections.

The Opposition National Party was headed for only 27 seats its worst result ever. — AP

Heavy rains bring respite to Sydney

Sydney, January 7

UNEXPECTED HEAVY rain before dawn on Monday doused bushfires around Sydney, prompting firefighters to sing and dance, but elsewhere along Australia's east coast weary firefighters continued to battle major blazes.

While firefighters in Sydney's western Blue Mountains and the Hawkesbury River to the northwest of the city enjoyed the smell of wet charcoal, others fought 30 feet walls of flame on the state's south coast which has remained dry. Some 700 people were evacuated from small coastal towns around Sussex Inlet, 93 miles south of Sydney, and the south coast Princes Highway was closed.

With strong winds fanning a massive blaze on the south coast, a crop-dusting aircraft used for aerial water bombing crashed on a beach just after take off. The pilot was unharmed.

Despite the rain fire officials said Australia's 15-day summer bushfire crisis was far from over. "The bulk of the problem has diminished but none of it has gone," said NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Phil Koperberg.

Around 10,000 mostly volunteer firefighters have been battling up to 100 fires, many lit by arsonists, on fronts totalling

1,250 miles. The fires have destroyed 101 homes and burned more than 550,000 hectares, an area twice the size of Greater London, but there have been no deaths. The fires, dubbed "Black Christmas", are the most intense since Sydney's 1994 fires, when four people died and just over 200 homes were lost. Australia's most deadly fires swept through Victoria and South Australia states in 1983, killing 76 people.

Early Monday up to 1.5 inches of rain fell on major fire fronts in the Blue Mountains national park area 35 miles west of Sydney and the Hawkesbury area 30 miles northwest of the city.

Blue Mountains fire official Mark Williams said the rain had doused the fire front, but there remained smouldering logs and trees. Remote area firefighting teams were dropped into the blackened bush Monday to extinguish any smoking trees.

"Most of the troops are consolidating and catching up on well deserved rest," said Williams. "We are just monitoring and patrolling to make sure there are no re-ignitions. There is always possibilities that once the ground dries out there could be some re-ignition."

The wet, cloudy conditions in Sydney cleared on Monday afternoon with strong winds and higher temperatures returning.

Reuters

Bushfires rage for 11th day ⁴¹⁻¹⁰ in Australia ⁴¹¹

Sydney, January 3

BUSHFIRES RAGED from the mountains to the sea on Australia's east coast today as thousands of weary firefighters ended their 11th day of battling more than 100 fires with no rain in sight.

While fires in Sydney's leafy northern suburbs were contained, others burned out of control in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney and along the south coast, again threatening homes.

Some 10,000 firefighters are facing fires, many lit by arsonists, on fronts totaling 1,250 miles.

The fires have destroyed 160 homes and burned an area twice the size of greater London, but there have been no deaths.

One fire stretching in a 37-mile arc from the Blue Mountains to the coast south of Sydney was being bombed by a "Sky Crane" helicopter dropping 1,980 gallons of water at a time.

The fire, nicknamed the "Burratorang Beast," has burned out of control in the Burratorang valley at the foot of the mountains since Christmas Day and Thursday licked mountain towns. "You simply can't directly attack a fire like this by ground crews. It's much too ferocious in terms of its intensity," said fire official John Winter.

New fires on the south coast saw several coastal towns on alert Thursday with some evacuations. Twelve national parks on



REUTERS PHOTO

Firefighters battle a bushfire as it approaches homes in the Blue Mountains suburb of Falconbridge, Sydney, on Thursday.

the coast were closed due to out of control fires.

Fire officials said weather conditions across NSW state were easing with moist easterly winds replacing the hot, dry westerlies which have been fanning fires. But without rain there was no end in sight to the fires.

"Given the amount of fire

activity that we have, conditions are not easing to the extent we would like to see. There is no rain in sight," said Winter.

Australians who fled to the beach to escape the fires returned to their homes on Thursday, many to find smouldering piles of ash and rubble.

Reuters

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Bushfires reach Sydney suburbs

FROM PAUL TAIT

Arsonists 7-4 8/1

Sydney, Jan. 2 (Reuters): Bushfires destroyed at least eight homes south of Australia's biggest city, Sydney, today as police arrested 21 people, some as young as nine, on suspicion of arson.

Other homes remained under threat in Sydney's leafy northern suburbs for a second day as firefighters battled searing heat and strong winds.

"It's hard to think of a bigger threat," New South Wales Premier Bob Carr told Australian Broadcasting Corp television. "It's very much like war."

Local radio reported that several hundred residents had been evacuated to beaches from their homes around the popular holiday township of Sussex Inlet, 190 km south of Sydney.

Summer temperatures of up to 35 Celsius and winds gusting up to 70 km an hour fanned about 100 fires near Sydney and across New South Wales (NSW) state as a 10-day crisis showed few signs of abating. Police say many of the fires were deliberately lit and have set up an arson taskforce.

They said today that among the 21 people arrested on suspicion of lighting fires deliberate-

ly were 14 juveniles, some as young as nine. Seven adults had also been caught since the arson taskforce was set up six days ago.

The 35-person police unit, named Strike Force Tronto, is now trying to track down serial arsonists suspected of starting the fires.

More than 150 homes have now been destroyed but there had been no significant loss of property since last week.

The harsh weather whipped up a 60-km firefront stretching in an arc from the Blue Mountains west of the city south to the coast. Many fires broke containment lines set by 10,000 weary firefighters over the past few days. NSW Fire Brigade spokesman Ian Krimmer said at least six homes were destroyed in one fire burning on a wide front around the Wollondilly River about 90 km southwest of Sydney. At least another two homes were burned in the hamlets of Cudmirrah, Berrara and Manyanah around Sussex Inlet. ABC radio said at least 2,000 people had been evacuated from Sussex Inlet.

"The tragedy is we do have some reports of property lost," Krimmer told Channel Nine television.