

'Monster's back broken'

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THE END may be in sight for thousands of Eden District residents held captive by deadly fires that ravaged the area for nearly a week.

Knysna municipal spokesperson Fran Kirsten said all fires were contained and, while they were confident last night that they had "broken the back of the monster", officials would know for certain today.

Seven people perished in fires over the last six days, including a volunteer firefighter, and the mother of a three-year-old.

Residents of 20 suburbs had

to be evacuated, and tallies so far, conducted only in Knysna's epicentre, reveal that 408 properties have been destroyed.

About 1 100 firefighters were working into the night.

In the Bitou municipality, Bradley Richards, a volunteer firefighter for the Fire Protection Association and Bitou fire department, sustained injuries to 70 percent of his body last week.

On Saturday, fires spread towards the Plettenberg Bay airfield, but were eventually contained.

In George, five firefighters sustained minor injuries as fires flared up there as well at the weekend.

"We will only know for sure by tomorrow, but we think that today we were able to break the

back of the monster. All fires are contained and we didn't have to evacuate anyone. There were a few flare-ups, but they were quickly taken care of," Kirsten said.

James-Brent Styan, the spokesperson for Local Government MEC Anton Bredell, said cooler weather yesterday had made for improved aerial support.

"Aircraft were airborne shortly before 9am as the morning fog and smog lifted – both water-bombing choppers and fixed-wing spotter planes.

"The total fire line still stretches to more than 100km between Sedgfield and Plettenberg Bay, and the latest hotspots were identified for concerted attack this morning," Styan said.

The situation may need a declaration of a disaster area in terms of repairs

According to the SA Weather Service, there is a 30% chance of rain in the affected areas today and on Thursday.

Wind speed is predicted to pick up on Thursday and reach up to 70km/h.

The Knysna Municipality has developed a questionnaire on www.surveymonkey.com, where affected residents can

report their damage incurred, and related needs.

Public Works Minister Nathi Nhleko said a technical assessment team was evaluating damage to infrastructure caused by heavy storms, strong winds and fires in parts of the Western Cape.

He said available resources needed to be stretched as far as possible to cover affected areas, and double-dipping avoided during rollout of emergency intervention measures.

The provincial education department said 135 schools had reported storm damage to its Safe Schools Call Centre, 41 of them to their roofs.

Schools have also reported water damage to classrooms, fallen trees and damage to fences.

Nhleko said urgent intervention was required to expedite repairs.

Minimum interruption of services to communities will be determined on the strength of the team's recommendations. The storm, which wreaked havoc, claimed eight lives and damaged more than 825 structures, while 2 502 people were affected in Imizamo Yethu and 400 in Macassar Village.

The City's Disaster Management Centre reported that roofs have been blown off in Mitchells Plain, Lavender Hill, Ottery, Delft, Philippi and Nyanga.

Public Works spokesperson Lesiba Kgwele said Nhleko would visit some of those affected by the storms.

"We know that the province

might struggle here and there in terms of meeting all the requirements.

"We are positioning ourselves because the situation might need a declaration of a disaster area, which would allow the department to move in faster in terms of repairs so that schooling is not negatively impacted," Kgwele said.

He said Public Works was consolidating the report of the education department.

"The minister is coming down to visit the Western Cape, particularly the affected areas. He will receive that report with recommendations as to what it is that needs to be done," he said.

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