

VREDEHOEK, Cape Town residents were evacuated from their homes early yesterday as strong winds brought a raging wildfire close to their properties. While the blaze had been largely contained by yesterday afternoon, firefighters were still monitoring the affected areas for flare-ups.

I HENK KRUGER African News Agency (ANA) INSET: The Reading Room of the Jagger Library at UCT was completely gutted by the fire. I PHANDO JIKELO African News Agency (ANA)

Firefighters battle windswept blaze on Table Mountain

REUTERS, AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY and MERCURY CORRESPONDENTS

A WILDFIRE that tore through the Table Mountain National Park destroying more than 400 hectares of vegetation, damaging historical sites and forcing people to evacuate their homes and schools to close, has been described as one of the biggest in the City of Cape Town's recent history.

Firefighters were able to largely contain the blaze by yesterday despite difficult conditions. Winds of up to 45km/h put water-bombing helicopters out of action and more than 250 firefighters were tackling fast-spreading flare-ups from the ground only.

Police confirmed that one suspect, 35, had been arrested yesterday on a charge of arson in connection with the fire.

"It is alleged that a member of the local neighbourhood watch witnessed three suspects making a fire on the mountain and alerted authorities. Two

of the suspects managed to evade arrest,"

provincial police spokesperson Colonel Andre Traut said.

City of Cape Town mayor Dan Plato described the fire as one of the biggest in the city's recent history.

The fire started early on Sunday on the slopes of Devil's Peak, forcing UCT students to evacuate residences as runaway flames set campus buildings ablaze.

The Cape Town Heritage Trust said in a statement yesterday that it had learnt that the fire had destroyed a large part of the cultural landscape of the Rhodes Estate, the historic restaurant and tea garden next to Rhodes Memorial, and several buildings on the main campus at UCT – including the Jagger Library, which had an internationally significant collection of historic archival documents and books, and the Fuller Hall residence.

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Mostert's Mill, the only restored

and working windmill in the country, and the historic Cadboll House, which served as accommodation for students,

were also destroyed in the fire.

"It is not only the historic buildings themselves that have been lost, but their contents and collections; a memory and resource of immense value to all South Africans and indeed the world."

Two firefighters sustained burn wounds and were hospitalised for treatment, officials said, as a change in wind direction saw the fire spread rapidly towards the city bowl.

All schools in the Vredehoek area were asked to evacuate, a disaster management spokesperson said, adding that homes used to accommodate travelling Cabinet ministers in Walmer Estate were also being cleared

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Regarding the ministers' homes,

Minister of Public Works and Infrastruc-

ture, Patricia de Lille said in a statement that one minister's Cape Town residence in Newlands was completely destroyed by the fire on Sunday.

She said that yesterday, relatives of three members of the executive were evacuated from Walmer Estate properties. The relatives of one minister and two deputy ministers were also evacuated from these properties.

As news of the extent of the damage and destruction emerged yesterday, support flooded in from across the country for UCT students, residents and the firefighters.

SA National Parks thanked residents and businesses who responded to a call for donations of food, water and energy drinks

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"Scores of community members and businesses came in numbers at the New-

lands fire base to drop off food, water,

energy drinks and an assortment of other necessities required," said Table Mountain National Park manager Frans van Rooyen.

Humanitarian organisation Gift of the Givers yesterday distributed meals to thousands of students and firefighters.

The Shoprite Group was also providing warm meals to evacuated students. The Shoprite Mobile Soup Kitchen served students housed at the Mupine College in Pinelands.

UCT spokesperson Elijah Moholola said the fire would definitely have a financial impact on the university.

"We do not at this stage have a concrete update in terms of the extent of the damage, which buildings have been affected as well as how much damage there is in each of the buildings. We are going to be carrying out an assessment later," said Moholola.

A fourth-year business science UCT student, Kribashan Naidoo, described how he had mere minutes to get out of the shower, change, and gather some belongings as his residence, Smuts Hall, was evacuated on Sunday.

"It was a bit of a shock, I came out of the shower and heard the megaphone. It became very smoky and gloomy and we had to exit quickly. I left with one set of clothes and my laptop bag.

"As we were leaving, we started seeing tiny fires in the bushes around our res. We left and we never turned back," he said.

Originally from Durban, Naidoo said many of his peers were in disarray because of the uncertainty about their belongings, academics, and where they were going to stay.

"I have no clue what my room looks like now. I know that Smuts and Fuller have structural damage, but I don't know to what extent. One of the rooms has been completely burnt but I don't know about my room," he said.

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