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Firefighters contain most of fatal Esperanza blaze

By Jonathan Abrams and Kenneth R. Weiss
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Taking advantage of calm winds and cooler temperatures, firefighters have contained all but one pocket of the wildfire that has claimed the lives of four firemen, 34 houses and more than 63 square miles of mostly rugged terrain.

In its fifth day, the Esperanza fire in the mountain communities west of Palm Springs was 90% contained and officials said today they expected full containment at 6 p.m. More than 40,200 acres have been burned.

"Mother Nature is now helping us for the first time, but we don't want to be complacent," Daniel Berlant, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry said Sunday.

Officials said they were still concerned with the southeastern section of the blaze, burning on steep slopes difficult for ground crews to reach.

"It's really tough terrain, and that's what is making it so rough for us," Berlant said. "We haven't been able to stop the forward progress there."

Still, fire authorities were confident enough Sunday to release 500 of the nearly 3,000 firefighters who have battled the blaze — at an estimated cost of \$5.5 million.

A lull in the Santa Ana winds allowed crews to make considerable progress, said Maurice Johnson, 35, a Sacramento firefighter with dirt caked on his uniform. "This thing started like a bat out of hell, but we are finally getting control," he said.

At least 750 people remained homeless late Sunday as a mandatory evacuation remained in place for about 500 homes in Twin Pines and Poppet Flats. Authorities reopened Highway 243 for about five hours Sunday and allowed residents to visit their homes to collect belongings and care for horses and other livestock left behind in the rural area.

Pablo Cerda of Fountain Valley, the 23-year-old firefighter suffering from burns over most of his body, remained in critical condition Sunday at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center in Colton.

Vigils were held at several Southern California churches and fire stations Sunday to pray

for Cerda's recovery and to express condolences to the families of four firefighters who were killed when flames overtook them as they tried to protect a home.

Cerda family spokesman Eddie Cortez thanked people for their thoughts and prayers. The family, he said, wanted "everyone to know that Pablo's dream was to help people, and on Thursday morning, that's just what he was doing — protecting and serving."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger attended a church service in San Bernardino with Cerda's family and shook hands with fire officials at the Esperanza fire command center before turning his attention to the assembled television cameras and microphones.

"This is a sad story," the governor said. "But we have more than 2,500 firefighters working for the same goal, and that is unbelievable." He lauded the fire crews and law enforcement officials as "the best of the best."

Later in the day, the governor spent about half an hour driving through scorched hills and viewing blackened homes in Twin Pines.

Riverside County Sheriff Bob Doyle announced that his office had received more than 225 tips in the arson investigation.

"We are going to chase down every one of them," Doyle said. "We feel someone out there knows who this person is, and we need them to come forward."

More than 50 investigators continue to work on the case, but Doyle said there were no suspects. Authorities are offering \$500,000 for information that would lead to the arrest and conviction of the arsonist. They have set up a special arson tip line: (951) 922-7116.

The Esperanza fire was set about 1 a.m. Thursday in the foothills near Esperanza Avenue in Cabazon. Fanned by Santa Ana wind gusts up to 60 mph, the wildfire quickly grew out of control.

Later that morning, the wind-blown flames overwhelmed the U.S. Forest Service crew of Engine 57 from the Alandale Station in the San Bernardino National Forest. Killed were Mark Loutzenhiser, 43, the team's captain; Jason McKay, 27, of Phelan; Jess McLean, 27, of Beaumont; and Daniel Hoover-Najera, 20, of San Jacinto.

Their deaths inspired exhausted fire crews to find the strength to corral the blaze.

"These fellows weren't able to finish the job," said firefighter Jeff Schroeder, 46, of Sacramento, explaining that he took some measure of satisfaction in helping them complete what they "died trying to do."

"When one of your own goes down," Schroeder said, "you just want to do anything you can to help."

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