News
EarthBeat



Melted chairs are shown outside the burned Maligne Lodge July 26, 2024, after wildfires encroached into Jasper, Alberta, in the overnight hours of July 24 and 25. Archbishop Richard W. Smith of Edmonton, Alberta, conveyed his "sorrow, solidarity and support to the people of Jasper and the parish community of Our Lady of Lourdes" in a July 25 statement. (OSV News/Amber Bracken, Reuters)

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Edmonton, Alberta — July 29, 2024
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Edmonton Archbishop Richard W. Smith's heart is with the people of Jasper, Alberta, and tourists forced to evacuate from the wildfire devastating the small alpine town and the neighboring famous Jasper National Park in the overnight hours of July 24 and 25.

"Today is indeed a very sad day, and I wish to convey my sorrow, solidarity and support to the people of Jasper and the parish community of Our Lady of Lourdes," the archbishop stated July 25. "The status of Our Lady of Lourdes Church is unknown at this point, as residents remain evacuated while emergency crews continue to try to save as much of the town as they can."

"Also greatly impacted by this horrific fire are the thousands of people who call Jasper home as permanent and seasonal residents, as well as the surrounding communities," Smith said. "The loss of property is devastating, but even greater is the heartbreak for this world heritage site."

Smith also asked Our Lady of Lourdes pastor Father Anthony Narisetty, associate pastor Father Marreddy Udumala, parish staff and congregants to "please be assured of my prayers at this difficult time." He also acknowledged Our Lady of Lourdes' more than 50-year history as a "place of sanctity not only for the close-knit parish community but for people from around the world who come to visit Jasper and marvel at God's creation."

According to Parks Canada, over 25,000 people were evacuated from the town and the national park. The organization and Jasper Mayor Richard Ireland's municipal government are working in unified command to manage the crisis from the town of Hinton, located an hour northeast of Jasper.

Alberta Premier Danielle Smith, in a tearful press conference, stated that the images coming out of Jasper are "horrific" with "potentially" 30% to 50% of all buildings now incinerated by the presently out-of-control blaze.

The situation remains so volatile that Parks Canada cannot share information about specific structures and the extent of damage.

On an emotional note, Smith said: "We share the sense of loss with all of those who live in the town, who care for it and who have helped build it. And to those in Alberta and around the world who have experienced the magic of Jasper: The magic is not lost, and it never will be."

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Calgary, Edmonton and Grande Prairie are stepping up to shelter evacuees, and mental health assistance is being offered in all three cities.

Over 1,900 first responders are trying to extinguish the 175 active wildfires raging in Alberta, with over 50 classified as out of control. Over the next five days, reinforcement personnel were arriving to battle the blaze from Mexico, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Smith said that first responders, everyone impacted by the fire and individuals stepping up to help evacuees will remain in the prayers of the faithful over the coming weeks.

Meanwhile in the U.S., as of July 27, 102 large active wildfires are being managed nationwide and have burned more than 2.03 million acres, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

In California, the West's largest fire burning, reportedly caused by a man who pushed a flaming car into a gully in a park about 90 miles north of Sacramento July 24.

USA Today reported that the Park Fire, as it is being called, has now burned over 307,000 acres, according to Cal Fire. "It's currently the eighth-largest fire in California history, has no containment and is even producing its own clouds."