

Canada's Alberta blanketed by smoke as wildfire battle continues

May 17 (Reuters) - Smoke blanketed the skies over much of Alberta on Wednesday as firefighters from Canada and the U.S. battled raging wildfires that have prompted evacuations, disrupted rail service and shut energy production in Canada's main oil-producing province.

Hot and dry conditions have triggered an intense and early start to wildfire season in Alberta. As of Wednesday, there were 91 wildfires burning in the forest protection area of Alberta, including 27 out of control.

A cold front this week eased historically high temperatures and helped firefighting, which led authorities to lift some evacuation orders on Tuesday. The number of evacuees has dropped to about 12,000 from a peak of more than 30,000 people earlier this month, Alberta officials said at a briefing on Wednesday.

Still, lack of rain and higher temperatures forecast for later this week mean conditions for wildfires remain extremely volatile, Alberta's Public Safety Minister Mike Ellis said at the briefing.

The cold front brought strong winds that have carried wildfire smoke to neighboring provinces and left a large part of Western Canada with poor air quality.

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