

Huge fire ravages 600 homes in Brazil's Amazon



Residents of Educandos neighbourhood salvage their belongings

Manaus, Brazil

A huge fire blazed through 600 wooden homes built on stilts next to a river in Brazil's Amazon region overnight, decimating a poor area of the city of Manaus but causing no deaths, authorities said Tuesday.

"It's perhaps the biggest city fire in the history of Manaus," said the deputy chief of the local emergency service, Hermogenes Rabelo.

The inferno started late Monday and was only brought under control shortly after midnight after a three-hour struggle by more than 100 firefighters, the security secretariat for Amazonas state said.

Four people were taken to hospital for smoke inhalation.

The fire happened in Educandos, an impoverished and densely populated district near the center of Manaus that sits on the Rio Negro, a river that joins up with the Amazon River to flow out to the Atlantic Ocean.

Access for fire services was hampered by the narrow alleyways in the district, and tow-trucks had to be used to haul vehicles out of the way.

An initial investigation suggests a pressure cooker on a stove started the fire, which rapidly spread, fanned by strong gusts of wind at the time, authorities said.



Residents help firefighters to combat a massive fire

The Da Vinci threads

Da Vinci design jewel still key for Tuscan silk weavers



A woman at work in the laboratory of Antico setificio Fiorentino ancient silk factory in Florence.

AFP | Florence, Italy

Five hundred years after the death of Leonardo da Vinci, a silk mill incorporating one of his designs is still shuttling some of the finest threads in the world across its looms.

Tucked away in the historic San Frediano neighbourhood in Florence, L'Antico Setificio Fiorentino was founded in 1786 and is one of the oldest silk workshops in Europe.

Its looms date back to the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, but the jewel at its heart is a machine to unwind the reels of threads, designed by Renaissance genius Da Vinci, who died in 1519.

"It is a warping machine made in the late 17th century according to the maestro's original design, and we still make *passementerie* (tassels, cords, trimmings) today" using it, silk worker Beatrice Fazzini said.

The polymath's device is used to prepare the threads before they are placed on the loom, following a technique that has been closely guarded down the centuries.

Golden chenille, damask and taffeta with floral or geometric motifs are among the fabrics made here and sold for between 200 euros (\$226) and 1,500 euros (\$1,700) per metre.

The workshop, which since 2010 has belonged to the family of Italian fashion designer Stefano Ricci, manufactures fabrics, lace and ribbons in styles and



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colours favoured by the historic House of Medici, an Italian banking family and political dynasty. It was during the Medici's rise to power that silk manufacturing enjoyed a boom along the banks of the Arno River.

Mustard yellow, petrol blue

Fabrics produced by L'Antico Setificio Fiorentino can be



A close-up view of reels of thread in the laboratory of Antico setificio Fiorentino ancient silk factory in Florence



A woman at work in the laboratory of Antico setificio Fiorentino

found in places of grandeur both home and abroad, from Italy's palaces and the famous Uffizi Galleries in Florence, to the royal residence in Denmark and the Kremlin in Russia.

Pope Francis and opera singers Maria Callas and Andrea

Bocelli have also worn garments created on its aged looms.

"It's a museum that is also a factory," said Briza Datti, interior designer and head of the commercial sector.

The hand looms move to the weaver's rhythm and bear "the imprint of the family to which

they belonged in the past," she says.

The designs and fabrics produced down the ages are preserved in the workshop's historical archives, which can be visited by school children or tourists.

The 15 or so artisans that spend their days teasing threads say it is a privilege to produce precious fabrics in silk, linen and cotton once used by kings and emperors.

"I'm lucky to work here, surrounded by centuries-old looms, but it doesn't feel like a museum, just a special environment," says Simona Polimeni, who trained at the school of weaving and restoration in the Tuscan capital.

"Each fabric must be woven by the same person. The rhythm must always be the same, or you risk imperfections," the 26-year-old says, as she crosses the warp and weft threads in an echo of age-old gestures.

No fewer than eight hours of work are needed to produce two metres of this fabric, worthy of the court of 15th century Italian statesman Lorenzo the Magnificent himself.

On one of the looms, 50-year-old Silvana expertly shuttles shimmering colours, from mustard yellow to fuchsia and petrol blue.

The Brazilian, who came to Italy 30 years ago to work in the world-renowned textile industry in Tuscany, said she is proud to have such "a very creative job, in such an area of excellence".

Russia says will build up Arctic military presence

Moscow, Russia

Russia will build up its military presence in the Arctic over the next year, the defence minister said Tuesday, as Moscow seeks to assert its influence in the strategic region.

The announcement comes after years of increased activity in the Arctic, which Moscow has declared a top

priority due to its mineral riches and military importance.

"We'll finish building infrastructure in 2019 to accommodate air defence radar units and aviation guidance points on the Sredny and Wrangel Islands, and on Cape Schmidt" in the Russian Arctic, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

He said accommodation for mili-

tary personnel and further aviation infrastructure had been completed elsewhere in the Arctic, at a defence ministry meeting also attended by President Vladimir Putin.

Russia has opened a string of military and scientific bases in the Arctic in recent years, with interest in the region

growing as rising temperatures open up shipping routes and make hitherto inaccessible mineral resources easier to exploit.

Putin has made several trips to the Arctic and last year said further exploration and extraction of raw materials from the area was "extremely important".



Russian Tor-M2DT anti-aircraft missile systems ride through Red Square during the Victory Day (Courtesy of Newsweek)