

## Fires in Canberra Destroyed Observatory

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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CANBERRA, Australia (AP) - When fire ripped through the suburbs Australia's capital, flames also engulfed and destroyed an internationally renowned eye on the night sky. On Saturday, thousands of firefighters were on high alert at the start of a weekend expected to bring lethal hot and windy conditions across southeast Australia where 62 fires were raging, 20 of them out of control. Canberra's firestorms over the past several days killed four people and razed 530 homes. But international star gazers are also mourning the loss of the historic Mt. Stromlo Observatory that was still helping to refine the way astronomers observe the heavens after almost 80 years. Fire destroyed five telescopes, a workshop, eight staff homes and the observatory's main dome. The bill is expected to top \$12 million. The devastation was keenly felt almost half a world away at the Gemini North telescope on the summit of Mauna Kea in Hawaii. Astronomers at Mt. Stromlo had been building a sophisticated piece of equipment called a near-infrared Integral-Field Spectrograph for the Hawaiian telescope. The instrument was about the size of a desk and included a bundle of fiber-optic cables that would have been pointed at the incoming light from the telescope, said Gemini spokesman Peter Michaud. Each fiber would gather infrared light from a specific object or area of the sky, making it possible to analyze as many as 200 objects at a time. "It's quite a blow," Michaud said of the machine's destruction. The Australian National University, which owns the observatory, hopes to rebuild it. Preparing for a new round of fires, Prime Minister John Howard warned that Australia "could see a level of bush fire threat the equal of what we've had over the past few weeks and perhaps even worse." About 4,000 firefighters were preparing for the next battle in what has become a long, hot summer of devastating bush fires.