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UN official 'talking through her hat' on bushfires and climate change, says Tony Abbott

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Prime Minister Tony Abbott has dismissed the comments of a senior UN official who said there was a clear link between bushfires and climate change, arguing "fire is a part of the Australian experience".

In an interview with CNN, the head of the UN's climate change negotiations, Christiana Figueres, said on Monday that there was a clear link between climate change and bushfires such as those raging in New South Wales.

United Nations says Australian bushfires and climate change are linked; Prime Minister Tony Abbott says that's nonsense

Ms Figueres also warned that the Coalition government would pay a high political and financial price for its decision to scrap carbon pricing.

She noted that the World Meteorological Organisation had not yet established a direct link between the NSW fires and climate change.

"But what is absolutely clear is the science is telling us that there are increasing heat waves in Asia, Europe, and Australia; that these will continue; that they will continue in their intensity and in their frequency," Ms Figueres said.

Mr Abbott batted away the comments on Wednesday, saying that Australia had had "bad fires" since the beginning of European settlement.

"Well I think the official in question is talking through her hat, if I may say so," he told Fairfax Radio.

"Climate change is real as I've often said and we should take strong action against it. But these fires are certainly not a function of climate change, they're a function of life in Australia."

In the interview with Fairfax Radio, Mr Abbott also defended his decision to keep up his volunteer firefighting role.

The Prime Minister spent Saturday night with the Davidson Rural Fire Brigade on a backburning operation near Bilpin.

"I love my service with the brigade, it helps to keep me grounded, quite apart from being an important form of community service," he said.

When asked if his security detail was happy about the arrangement, he replied: "I think the short answer is, not very."

Mr Abbott said that he did not take "silly risks" when volunteering.

"I think the risks are well within the bounds of what's acceptable."

Greens leader Christine Milne said Mr Abbott had insulted Ms Figueres with his hat comment but that the real losers out of his "science denialism" were future victims of extreme fires, droughts and storms.

"Tony Abbott is the Prime Minister for science denialism. He thinks his opinion on global warming outranks the evidence of the best scientists in the world. It is arrogance in the extreme," Senator Milne said in a statement.

"The Prime Minister's hubris on global warming will see Australia swelter and burn, and our people suffer."

It is rare for a senior UN official to intervene in a domestic climate policy debate.

Ms Figueres' comments came three weeks before the next major round of UN-sponsored talks in Warsaw, which are aiming to reach a global climate treaty by

2015 that would take effect by 2020.

She described the NSW fires as an "example of what we may be looking at unless we take actually vigorous action".

The UN negotiator said the new Abbott government had chosen a more difficult and expensive path to emissions reduction than the previous Gillard government – noting that the Coalition had not stepped away from Australia's commitment to reduce its emissions by 5 per cent by 2020.

"The road that they are choosing to get to the same target that the previous government had could be much more expensive for them and for the population," Ms Figueres said.



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