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Pollution Killed 7 Million People Worldwide in 2012, Report Finds



A tourist boat navigates through the haze of the Guangdong Providence of China this month. The Country's rapid urbanization was cited as contributing to pollution.

By ANDREW JACOBS and IAN JOHNSON: March 25, 2014

BEIJING — From taxi tailpipes in Paris to dung-fired stoves in New Delhi, air pollution claimed seven million lives around the world in 2012, according to figures released Tuesday by the World Health Organization.

More than one-third of those deaths, the organization said, occurred in fast-developing nations of Asia, where rates of cardiovascular and pulmonary disease have been soaring.

Around the world, one out of every eight deaths was tied to dirty air, the agency determined — twice as many as previously estimated. Its report identified air pollution as the world's single biggest environmental health risk.

“The big news is that we have a better understanding of how large a role air pollution plays in strokes and coronary heart attacks,” said Dr. Carlos Dora, coordinator of public health and the environment at the organization. “Given the astronomical costs, countries need to find a way to prevent these non-communicable diseases.”

The report found that those who are most vulnerable live in a wide arc of Asia stretching from Japan and China in the northeast to India in the south.

Exposure to smoke from cooking fires means that poor women are especially at risk, the agency said. Indoor air pollutants loomed as the largest threat, involved in 4.3 million deaths in 2012, while toxic air outdoors figured in 3.7 million deaths, the agency said. Many deaths were attributed to both.

Breakneck urbanization in the developing nations of Asia, especially China, is a major force contributing to the air pollution problem.

The World Health Organization report, released in Geneva, coincided on Tuesday with the publication of a World Bank study in Beijing concerning China's drive to urbanize. The study, issued with the Development Research Center of China's State Council, argued that many of the country's cities had been allowed to sprawl wastefully and called for better-planned, denser cities instead.

The bank estimated that China will spend \$5.3 trillion on urban infrastructure over the next 15 years, as it plans to move 100 million farmers to cities and to better integrate another 100 million who already live in urban areas but lack full access to schools and hospitals.

The study said the Chinese government could save \$1.4 trillion of that cost — or about 15 percent of the country's total economic output last year — by planning its cities more rationally.

One way would be to halt the current practice of expropriating farmers' land and selling it to private developers, a method that helps raise money but leads to wasteful sprawl.

The bank said that building more densely in city centers would be more efficient; for example, Guangzhou, with 8.5 million residents, could accommodate 4.2 million more in the same space if it were as densely developed as Seoul, South Korea.

Based on current trends, the study said, Chinese cities in the next decade will gobble up land equal in area to the Netherlands, leading to longer commutes, higher energy consumption and continued high levels of air pollution.

Sprawl will cost China \$300 billion a year in premature deaths, birth defects and other health-related problems, the study said.

The study also emphasized the unfairness of the current system, with farmers receiving only 20 percent of their land's value.

That has led to chronic unrest and, the bank said, has increased the disparities in income between rich and poor. Some of the bank's recommendations were found in a plan released this month, which included proposals to better integrate existing residents.

China has said it wants one billion of its people, about 60 percent of the population, to be living in cities by 2020 — up from 54 percent now.

But the bank said urbanization is moving much faster than that, and so are the problems it creates.

Sri Mulyani Indrawati, managing director of the World Bank, said in an interview that to follow the bank's recommendations, China would need major changes in how cities finance new infrastructure.

Currently, local governments cannot levy taxes, so they rely on land expropriation instead. The Chinese leadership has good intentions to overhaul the system, but no specific plan yet, Ms. Indrawati said: “I don’t think that, at the moment in this case, there is clarity of when you are going to achieve what.”

The reports by the World Bank and World Health Organization each said the burning of noxious fuels — coal, wood and animal waste — was among the greatest threats to human health.

In India, the health agency estimated, 700 million people rely on biomass fuels like agricultural waste for indoor cooking.

Kirk R. Smith of the University of California, Berkeley, measured pollutants from smoky indoor ovens, and said they were comparable to burning 400 cigarettes an hour.

“Unfortunately, we have not made a lot of progress in the past decades, and household air pollution is still the largest single health risk factor for Indian women and girls,” the health agency quoted Dr. Smith as saying.

In China, the bigger culprit is coal, which supplies two-thirds of the country’s energy.

A study published last year in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences estimated that people in northern China, where the air pollution is worst, lived an average of five fewer years than those in the south.

Alarmed by the worsening smog and the rising discontent among urban residents, Chinese leaders have taken note, promising to reduce reliance on coal and introduce cleaner-burning motor fuels and more

energy-efficient construction methods. Prime Minister Li Keqiang declared a “war against pollution” in his annual report to the nation this month.

Though the winter heating season has ended, Beijing was still suffused with a familiar acrid haze on Tuesday. The United States Embassy’s air monitor rated the air as “very unhealthy,” a level at which outdoor activity should be avoided.

Dr. Dora of the health agency said he hoped the stark mortality figures released on Tuesday would prompt people and governments alike to confront the scourge of filthy air with greater urgency.

“What’s needed is collective action,” he said. “The air you are polluting is the same air you breathe.”
