

Report shows lethal pollution high in 2020 despite COVID lockdowns



Average lifespan is cut 4.1 years in China because of air pollution. (Photo:: Thomas Peter/Reuters)

Geneva, March 17 (RHC)-- The COVID-19 lockdowns worldwide last year reduced average levels of so-called PM2.5 pollution across the world but only 24 of 106 countries monitored met World Health Organization (WHO) safety guidelines, according to a report based on the world's largest database of ground-level air pollution measurements.

The partial or complete shutdown of transport and industry for months during the pandemic reduced PM2.5 pollution across the world, including in major cities, the IQAir quality report found.

Concentrations of the life-shortening particles -- cast off by traffic pollution and burning fossil fuels -- dropped 11 percent in Beijing, 13 percent in Chicago, 15 percent in New Delhi, 16 percent in London, and 16 percent in Seoul, the report said.

At least 60 percent of India's cities were more breathable last year than in 2019, and all of them had cleaner air than in 2018, it said. "Many parts of the world experienced unprecedented – but short-lived – improvements in air quality in 2020," said Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) and co-author of the report.

China and many South Asian nations experienced levels of PM2.5, tiny particulate matter that can clog lungs, several times greater than WHO-recommended thresholds, and in some regions, the concentration was six to eight times higher.

The most polluted capital cities in the world last year were New Delhi (84mcg/m³) and Dhaka (77mcg/m³), with Jakarta, Kathmandu, Islamabad, Hanoi and Beijing all in the top 20. About half of all European cities exceed the WHO's suggested limits.

Air pollution levels were made worse in 2020 – tied for the hottest year on record – by climate change, the report noted. Wildfires fuelled by scorching heatwaves led to extremely high pollution levels in California, South America and Australia.

Air pollution shortens lives worldwide by nearly three years on average, and causes more than eight million premature deaths annually, earlier studies have found. The WHO calculates 4.2 million deaths from outdoor air pollution but has underestimated the impact on cardiovascular disease, recent research has shown.

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