

UN chief calls for action to stem extreme heat epidemic



'Extreme heat is the new abnormal,' United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says [File: Mike Segar/Reuters] Antonio Guterres urges countries to shift away from fossil fuels to tackle the climate crisis driving extreme heat.

United Nations, July 26 (RHC)-- The head of the United Nations has called on countries to take action to address the effects of “crippling heat,” as the world experiences record-high temperatures that have put vulnerable communities at risk.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday, Antonio Guterres said billions of people around the globe are experiencing “an extreme heat epidemic” fuelled by climate change.

“Extreme heat is increasingly tearing through economies, widening inequalities, undermining the Sustainable Development Goals, and killing people,” the UN secretary-general said. “We know what is driving it: fossil fuel-charged, human-induced climate change. And we know it’s going to get worse; extreme heat is the new abnormal.”

Guterres’s warning comes a day after the European Union’s climate monitor said the world had experienced its hottest day on record this week. The Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) said on Wednesday that the global average surface air temperature on July 22 rose to 17.15 degrees Celsius (62.9 degrees Fahrenheit) – or 0.06 degrees Celsius higher than the record set just a day earlier.

Every month since June 2023 has now ranked as the planet’s warmest since records began in 1940, compared with the corresponding month in previous years, according to C3S. “This is exactly what climate science told us would happen if the world continued burning coal, oil and gas,” Joyce Kimutai, a climate scientist from Imperial College London, told the AFP news agency about this week’s findings. “And it will continue getting hotter until we stop burning fossil fuels and reach net zero emissions.”

The record had last been set for four consecutive days in early July 2023. Before that, the hottest day was in August 2016. Millions of people around the world have experienced record-high temperatures in recent weeks, including across the Middle East, Africa and Asia, where the crisis has exacerbated social inequalities.

More than 70 percent of the global workforce – some 2.4 billion people – are now at high risk of extreme heat, according to a report from the International Labour Organization (ILO) published on Thursday.

In Africa, nearly 93 percent of the workforce is exposed to excessive heat, and 84 percent of the Arab states’ workforces, the report found.

Excessive heat has been blamed for causing almost 23 million workplace injuries worldwide, and some 19,000 deaths annually.

Experts also have warned that as the effects of climate change intensify, weather patterns are becoming more extreme with droughts, super-charged hurricanes, floods and wildfires affecting much of the globe.

During Thursday’s news conference, Guterres said countries must reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, which worsens the climate crisis. “Leaders across the board must wake up and step up – and that means governments, especially G20 countries,” the UN chief said.

“The leadership of those with the greatest capabilities and capacities is essential. Countries must phase out fossil fuels fast and fairly.”

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