

UN reports future heatwaves will lead to large loss of life

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Women and children wash themselves after work at a muskmelon farm, during a heatwave, at a hand pump on the outskirts of Jacobabad, Pakistan [File: Akhtar Soomro/Reuters]

United Nations, October 12 (RHC)-- Heatwaves will become so extreme in parts of Africa and Asia within decades that human life there will be unsustainable, a new report by the United Nations and the Red Cross has warned.

Titled Extreme Heat: Preparing for the Heatwaves of the Future, the joint publication, said on Monday that 38 heatwaves accounted for the deaths of more than 70,000 people worldwide from 2010 to 2019 – a

likely underestimate of the real toll.

That figure made up more than one-sixth of the more than 410,000 deaths from disasters linked to extreme climate and weather over the same span, the report added, citing previous calculations made by the Red Cross.

Scientists have repeatedly stressed the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit), warning that crossing that threshold risks unleashing far more severe climate change effects on people, wildlife and ecosystems.

“Under 2°C of warming, an extreme-heat event is projected to be nearly 14 times as likely and to bring heat and humidity levels that are far more dangerous,” the report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Red Cross said.

“On current trajectories, heatwaves could meet and exceed these physiological and social limits in the coming decades, including in regions such as the Sahel, and South and South-West Asia,” it added.

The organizations warned in particular about the outsize impact on developing countries, citing Bangladesh, which experienced as much as a 20 percent increase in deaths on heatwave days compared with an average day. “Heatwaves account for some of the deadliest disasters on record,” Martin Griffiths, who heads OCHA, told reporters in Geneva.

“Devastating droughts like the one pushing Somalia to the brink of famine are made far deadlier when they combine with extreme heat. We can expect more of these in the future,” he added. The effects of recurrent heatwaves would include “large scale suffering and loss of life”, population movements and increased inequality, the report warned, adding that these trends were “already emerging”.

“It’s grossly unjust that fragile countries must bear deadly loss and damage from extreme heat when they are unambiguously and clearly and evidently the least responsible for climate change,” said Griffiths.

“Wealthier countries have the resources to help their people adapt and have made promises to do so. Poorer countries who are not responsible for these torturous heatwaves do not have those resources.” The organizations’ report called on governments to urgently take “aggressive steps” to prevent a future of recurrent heat disasters. “The single most important arena for action is in slowing and stopping climate change,” it said.

“Limiting global warming to 1.5°C rather than 2°C could result in up to 420 million fewer people being frequently exposed to extreme heatwaves and around 65 million fewer people being frequently exposed to ‘exceptional’ heatwaves.”

Beyond that, they encouraged governments to boost early-warning systems about heatwaves and give more training and funding to local responders who often are first on site when heatwaves hit.

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