Pakistan shuts primary schools in Lahore over record pollution

AFP – Pakistan's second city of Lahore will close primary schools for a week over record pollution, government authorities said Sunday, to avoid exposing millions of children to smog several times above levels deemed dangerous. For days, the city of 14 million people has been enveloped by smog, a mix of fog and pollutants caused by low-grade diesel fumes, smoke from seasonal agricultural burning and winter cooling.

The air quality index, which measures a range of pollutants, exceeded 1,000 on Saturday –- well above the level of 300 considered "dangerous" –- according to data from IQAir. The Punjab government also recorded peaks of over 1,000 on Sunday, which it considered "unprecedented".

"Weather forecast for the next six days shows that wind patterns will remain the same. Therefore we are closing all government and private primary schools in Lahore for a week," Jahangir Anwar, a senior environmental protection official in Lahore told AFP.

"All the classes" for children up to the age of 10, "public, private & special education… shall remain closed for one week" from Monday until Saturday, read a local government decision seen by AFP.

The decision added that the situation will be assessed again next Saturday to determine whether to extend the school closure.

"This smog is very harmful for children. Masks should be mandatory in schools. We are keeping an eye on the health of

children in senior classes," Punjab senior minister Marriyum Aurangzeb told a news conference Sunday.

Smog counters have been established in hospitals, she added.

Breathing the toxic air has catastrophic health consequences, with the WHO saying strokes, heart disease, lung cancer and respiratory diseases can be triggered by prolonged exposure.

– Children particularly vulnerable –

On Saturday, the concentration of deadly PM2.5 pollutants – fine particulate matter in the air that causes most damage to health – was more than 40 times the level deemed acceptable by the World Health Organisation. PM2.5 levels on Sunday morning exceeded that before decreasing slightly.

Last week, the provincial environmental protection agency announced new restrictions in four "hot spots" in the city.

Tuk-tuks equipped with polluting two-stroke engines are banned, as are restaurants that barbecue without filters.

Government offices and private companies will have half their staff work from home starting Monday.

Children are particularly vulnerable because they have less developed lungs and breathe more rapidly, taking in more air relative to their size than adults.

Last month, authorities banned schoolchildren from outdoor exercise until January and adjusted school hours to prevent children from travelling when the pollution is most punishing.

Pollution in excess of levels deemed safe by the WHO shortens the life expectancy of Lahore residents by an average of 7.5 years, according to the University of Chicago's Energy Policy Institute.

According to UNICEF, nearly 600 million children in South Asia

are exposed to high levels of air pollution and half of childhood pneumonia deaths are associated with air pollution.

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