

## **Choking on Air Pollution**

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High levels of dust and fumes prompt UN to launch a year-long study of air quality.

Spozhmai, 9, has been lying in a hospital bed for six days, struggling to breathe. So far this year, she has suffered 13 asthma attacks. The doctors say she also has bronchitis.

Her father, Akhter Mohammad, 60, blames air pollution in the Afghan capital for her illnesses. The city's air is thick with dust and fumes produced by the cars, motorbikes and lorries that choke the streets.

And to make things worse, Akhter's family lives beside a bakery which burns plastics and other rubbish to fuel the ovens.

Now, the government of President Hamed Karzai is starting to take action. It has invited a team of international scientists to carry out a study to measure the level of air pollution across the country.

It will take more than a year before the survey is completed. Officials hope the information will help demonstrate the effects of air pollution.

Said Asif Ali Zaidi, the head of the United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP, in Kabul, said that even the small amount of data currently available shows that "the levels of air pollution in Afghan cities are above recommended international norms".

Dr Ghulam Sarwar Abassi, director of the environmental health department at the Ministry of Health, said that high levels of air pollution can cause such illnesses as severe bronchitis, emphysema, allergies and asthma as well as cardiac problems.

Abassi said he believes there are also high levels of lead in the air, which has been shown to slow the physical and intellectual growth of children.

The only data currently available comes from a landmark 2002 UN report, which used just a few indicators to provide snapshot data on the levels of air pollution in the cities of Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar and Herat.

Zaidi said the main causes of pollution are the number and poor condition of vehicles in the country, the quality of the fuel they burn (which often includes high levels of sulphur and lead), dust caused by many factors including extensive deforestation, and the burning of toxic materials such as tyres and plastic.

There is anecdotal evidence that suggests air pollution may have grown worse, given that there are more vehicles on the roads, land and air transport has increased and the population has increased, because of the return of refugees.

Conditions have become so bad that some people have taken to wearing face masks to reduce the amount of dust they breathe.

Kabul wasn't always so dry and dusty.

Mohammed Hanif Malgarai, 52, remembers when the capital was filled with parks, such as the Chehelsotoon, Babur and Bagh-e-Bala gardens. He also remembers how the road from the city centre heading toward the province of Logar was lined with trees.

"There were thousands of trees on both sides of the boulevard from Deh Mazang up to Darul Aman," he said. "It looked like a natural tunnel and when you drove along the street all you could see were trees."

That started to change in the 1980s after the Soviet invasion. "After the Russians captured Afghanistan the trees were cut down because of security concerns," he said.

It wasn't just the Russians cutting down trees that were being used by the mujahedin as cover for their ambushes on Soviet troops that led to wide-spread deforestation. Local people also cut down trees to use for firewood.

UNEP and the Asia Development Bank are now working with the Ministry of Irrigation, Water Resources and Environment to tackle air pollution.

Dost Muhammad Amin, the deputy environment minister, said a major tree-planting programme is under way. "We brought one million plants from America, Iran and Pakistan to Kabul and planted them," he said.

Zaidi also said that UNEP is supporting the Environment Ministry in preparing an Environmental Protection Act that would require certain types of projects to file an environmental impact statement before they gain permission to go ahead.

Ghulam Muhammad Malikyar, an advisor with the Asia Development Bank, said his organisation has committed 450,000 US dollars to reducing air pollution. It has provided two foreign advisors and is training Afghan workers who are now installing the air-pollution monitoring equipment across the country.

Abdul Qadir, head of meteorology in the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, said his department is starting to encourage farmers to grow trees to curb soil erosion and reduce the amount of dust in the air.

And on June 5, World Environment Day, there will be a major awareness programme in schools to encourage youngsters to be more aware of pollution.

Still, some say officials should be doing more. Muhammad Naveed blames the government for allowing the burning of toxic rubbish. He said that the government "should ban the burning of tyres and plastic materials in ovens and public bathhouses (hamams) as fuel."

Parents like Akhter can only hope that conditions improve soon and that their children will once again be able to breathe freely.

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**Location:** Pakistan  
Iraqi Kurdistan  
Iran  
Afghanistan

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