

Editorial**Smog is Serious Health Hazard like Covid****Mohsin Masud Jan**

Editor

Technically smog is ground level ozone. It is caused when air pollution and fumes combined with fog and sunlight, forming a thick layer of smoke like film in the atmosphere. Smog is an urban phenomenon. Its reasons are varied. Firstly, big towns are becoming bigger because the smaller towns and rural areas have little to offer to their residents in terms of economic opportunities and municipal services.

Health experts around the world had been apprehensive about the confluence of Covid-19 and winter season, which pushes more people indoors and leads to a spike in instances of seasonal flu. In cities like New Delhi and Lahore, however, the current weather ushers in another hazard, now dubbed smog season.

While the news of Pfizer's vaccine trials showing 90% effectiveness against Covid-19 is encouraging, the accessibility of this vaccine in poorer countries like ours will remain limited at best. Even if the Pfizer vaccine gets expedited approval and begins production in quantities enough to make its way over to countries like ours, it needs to be stored at temperatures below -70 degree Celsius. Pakistan hardly has the infrastructure to offer a vaccine with such stringent storage requirements to the masses. Perhaps the phase three Chinese vaccine trials ongoing in Pakistan will yield more positive results, in terms of accessibility and effectiveness.

Meanwhile, Pakistan may have been spared from the first coronavirus wave, but the country is now experiencing a second wave of infections. Pakistan's positive test rate has overtaken India's and tripled over this past month, according to the 'Our World in Data' website run by Oxford University. Conversely, in India, which already has the world's second highest number of cases, there is growing evidence of air pollution causing increased Covid deaths in major cities like New Delhi, which is a trend that should be ringing alarm bells for Pakistan too.

With all the bluster about trying to balance livelihoods with the need to isolate, the ruling PTI has been busy congratulating itself for its smart-lockdown strategy to pay attention to the impending danger of coronavirus causing havoc in major cities of Punjab, with the onset of another smog season.

Our policymakers and health experts should have paid more attention to a recent Harvard University study, which has noted how even small increase in long-term exposure to PM2.5 leads to a large increase in Covid-19 death rate. This study has predicted how places

with higher pollution levels will see higher numbers of hospitalisations and more Covid-19 deaths.

New Delhi and Lahore have now again begun trading places for topping the list of most polluted cities in the world. Despite the impending threat of smog season fueling coronavirus fatalities, there seems to be no significant let-up in emissions by the transport sector, or coal and other waste-based energy generation activities in industries and brick-kilns, or even in terms of averting other hazardous activities such as trash burning.

The EPA in Lahore seems blissfully unaware of the pollution problem, having declared air quality to be 'good' on the same day other air pollution measures deemed it 'hazardous'.

There has been a growing wave of clean-air activism and even foreign embassies using new sources of pollution data have applied some pressure on government. Afforestation efforts have been afoot to contend with the drastic deforestation of the city due to years of aggressive road-building and unthinking urban development schemes. Yet, these have been unable to stem the tide of another smog season in Lahore, Gujranwala, Multan or Faisalabad.

All through the year, our policymakers and relevant officials should have been thinking about the arrival of another smog season in larger cities of Punjab, and the possibility of it coinciding with a resurgence of Covid-19. They should have been working double-time to ensure main contributors which cause air pollution to become untenable during winter were kept in check, especially when the coronavirus threat had not yet dissipated.

Instead of putting in place pre-emptive measures to avert the onset of smog season, the provincial government and ruling party remained busy discrediting opponents and hanging onto power. A confluence of smog season and Covid-19 has now descended upon Lahore and other large cities of Punjab, and this dual threat seems poised to extract its pound of flesh.

Measures which shall propose in the policy document if implemented efficiently could certainly help reduce air pollution and therefore, smog but a more protective policy stance could lie in decentralization of municipal services.

According to a report on the density a smog and air pollution, Lahore is the fourth worst city of the world. Followed by the Beijing, Ahwaz and Mongolia. It would be interesting to know and learn from what these countries are doing to deal with the problem.