

UN rights experts urge action to curb 'invisible threat' of toxic air

24 February 2017 – United Nations human rights experts are calling for strong, urgent action by States to ensure that people around the world can enjoy the human right to live in environments free from contamination.

Air pollution is a major threat to human rights worldwide and toxic air pollutants are associated with an increased risk of disease from stroke, heart disease, cancer and respiratory diseases, including asthma, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and hazardous substances and wastes, Baskut Tuncak, said in a news release issued today by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Three million deaths each year are linked to exposure to outdoor air pollution, according to estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO). There is also growing research evidence indicating that air pollution has become the leading environmental cause of death in the world.

Joining Mr. Tuncak in the appeal are Dainius Puras, the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and John H. Knox, the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Silent pandemic

Children and people in vulnerable situations, including women of reproductive age, the elderly, those in poor health and those living in less wealthy communities remain the most vulnerable, the experts warned.

According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), 300 million children almost one in seven of the world's total, live in areas with the most toxic levels of outdoor air pollution, a situation paediatricians describe as a 'silent pandemic.'

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A threat like this can no longer be ignored, they said. States have a duty to prevent and control exposure to toxic air pollution and to protect against its adverse effects on human rights.

The experts said that impunity for those responsible for air pollution is rampant today, with recent reports of environmental ministers even denying its effects, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

They stressed the need for cross-border cooperation to promote the adoption of preventive and control measures in the energy, industrial and

transportation sectors, as well as the need for investment in infrastructures and long-term incentives.

Improving the regulation of toxic emissions from industrial sources and vehicles, strengthening waste management and recycling practices, and promoting renewable energies are crucial steps to effectively address air quality issues and public health, the experts concluded.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.