

Editorial

Coal dumping

THE Sindh Environmental Protection Agency recently gave permission for a 23-acre coal storage facility at Bin Qasim Town in Karachi. The move is deemed controversial as it goes against the Supreme Court's orders, when it disallowed open coal storage in the city last year. The apex court ruled that the fossil fuel can only be kept in warehouses; and when being transported, blankets and moisture must be provided to limit the pollution created by dust. Furthermore, the decision was taken by Sepa on the basis of a simple Initial Environmental Examination, which meant it could bypass public review and conveniently ignore concerns raised by residents in the area. But according to a report published in this paper yesterday, some residents who live close to the site complain of breathing problems due to the large amounts of coal and its residue being dumped close to their homes. Studies have shown that even if coal is kept in storage, it is still hazardous to human health as it continues to transmit fine particulate pollution in the air, which leads to an increase in cardiovascular and respiratory complications. Secondly, it is a widely acknowledged fact that coal generation is harmful for the environment, and it is one of the largest producers of global greenhouse gas emissions. In this age of unpredictable weather patterns and their devastating implications for agrarian economies such as Pakistan, which ranks seven on the list of countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, alternative forms of energy must be considered. For instance, solar energy and wind power have enormous potential in this country, and more efforts are needed to harness these.

Unfortunately in Asia, dependency on coal for power generation has not subsided, despite repeated warnings by environmentalists about its various hazards. While one cannot deny that it is a cheaper and more stable form of energy, which provides employment to thousands of workers in the industry, the health and environmental costs of storing, handling, transporting and burning this fossil fuel cannot be ignored any longer. And the voices of those who raise concern cannot be drowned out by powerful industries and government — which is the case at the moment. It is apparent that the more sensible countries have started phasing out coal as a source of power generation. But many in Pakistan continue to endorse it as the solution to the country's energy and employment problems.