

Countering air Pollution

Each year, June 5 is celebrated as the World Environment Day with the UN designating different themes to highlight various environmental challenges and persuade governments to take action. This year's theme is "Air Pollution." Since 1974 it has become a major global event, though one of the world's biggest polluters, the US, under President Donald Trump refuses to recognise the link between climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, and despite ample evidence terms global warming "a hoax". But no one is safe from the effects of air pollution. According to "European Heart Journal", an average person in Europe loses two years of life from breathing polluted air. And 97 percent of cities in lower and middle income countries do not meet the World Health Organization's minimum air quality standards; in high income countries, 29 percent of cities fall short of its guidelines. Air pollution-related ailments kill about 7 million people every year.

In Pakistan, environmental pollution plays havoc with public health. As per a World Bank report, outdoor air pollution in this country accounts for 22,000 premature adult deaths and indoor pollution 28,000 deaths, annually. Countless others suffer from chronic ailments. Among children it is associated with poor lung and mental development, low birth weight, asthma, cancers, even autism and other health issues. Unfortunately, so far environmental degradation has been of least concern to policymakers. Indeed, some of it is caused by activities in neighbouring India, and hence is beyond control since Nature does not recognise borders between nation-states. But the clear issues are inside this country, which need to be addressed to improve the quality of air we all breathe. For a start, laws inhibiting unrestrained emissions from industries, brick kilns, burning of tyres for fuel, and motor vehicles ought to be effectively implemented. Another contributor to air pollution are diesel generators, though, in view of energy shortages they have become a nasty necessity. Similarly, burning of wood and other biomass for cooking and other purposes in rural areas or poor households in cities cannot be stopped for obvious reasons, but at least people should be made aware of what they inhale so they can take necessary precautions.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's interest in the issue inspires hopes of a better future. His billion tree plantation campaign has been extended from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to other parts of the country, which should help counter environmental degradation to a significant extent. Last winter, his government took preemptive measures to stop the smog that for the last few years kept returning to engulf Lahore and several areas in southern Punjab and upper Sindh. A lot more needs to be done to make individuals, enterprises, and provincial governments act with a sense of responsibility towards the environment. This government must formulate a comprehensive, long-term plan to deal with the challenge.

Editorial