

Dust pollution worsened last year

Says UN

AFP, Geneva

The amount of dust in the world's air worsened in 2022, the United Nations said on Thursday, as it called for more research into how climate change may increase sandstorm hotspots.

The UN's World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said the slight rise was due to increased emissions from west-central Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Iranian Plateau and northwestern China.

"Human activities are having an impact on sand and dust storms," WMO chief Petteri Taalas said in the global weather agency's Airborne Dust Bulletin. "The global average of annual mean dust surface concentrations in 2022 was slightly higher than that in 2021," the annual WMO report said.

Last year's figure was 13.8 micrograms (one millionth of a gram) per cubic metre; in 2021 the figure had been 13.5. The peak estimated annual mean dust surface concentration was located in the Bodele region in Chad.

'MORAL DECISION'

Kerala firm stops uniform sales to Israel police

AFP, Bengaluru

An Indian firm is terminating a longstanding contract to make uniforms for the Israeli police, telling AFP yesterday that it had made a "moral decision" in light of the war in Gaza.

Maryann Apparel in the southern state of Kerala said it had supplied around 100,000 uniforms to Israel's police force for every year since 2015.

"It is a moral decision," the company's managing director Thomas Olickal told AFP.

Olickal said in a Wednesday statement that a strike on a hospital and the "loss of thousands of innocent lives" in the conflict had prompted the decision.

Olickal told AFP his firm will fulfil its existing commitments to Israel, which end in December, but will not take new orders.

"We are okay resuming business with them after peace is restored," added Olickal, who employs around 1,500 people at his firm.

Martyred Hafizur finally recognised after 52 years

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A Crack Platoon member, said, "It is equally delightful and painful for me that Hafiz bhai has finally been recognised so many years after independence."

Between 1974 and 2014, Hafizur's family sought his recognition as a "martyred freedom fighter" nine times.

On October 24 and 31 last year, The Daily Star published two reports titled "Half a century gone chasing recognition" and "Denied again".

Following the reports, Supreme Court lawyer Mohammad Bakir Hossain Mridha on January 15 filed a writ petition with the High Court. On January 22, the HC questioned why Hafizur is not recognised as a martyred freedom fighter.

BNP leader accused

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Six others -- Md Shah Alam, Md Yousuf Talukdar, Jane Alam, Lokman, Md Jasim, and Firoz Ahmed -- were in the robbery gang. But they managed to flee during the police drive, said the case statement.

Contacted over the phone on Thursday, Firoz said, "I reached Macca on October 4 for performing Umrah. I have been here since then."

"I have been facing police harassment for years. I have been away from Raozan for around 10 years due to police harassment. I was compelled to live in Chattogram city. I could not even join my mother's namaz e-janaza a few years ago fearing police harassment," he told The Daily Star.

Talking to this correspondent, his son said his father is in Saudi Arabia. According to travel documents



The sister (C-R) of Palestinian farmer Ahmed al-Shawaf, who was killed earlier during Israeli bombardment, is comforted during his funeral outside Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

China and Russia find common cause in Gaza crisis

REUTERS, Beijing/Washington

With anger building across the Middle East over Israel's strikes in Gaza, China and Russia are finding common cause with countries across the region in support of the Palestinians.

For Moscow and Beijing, Israel's bombardment of Gaza presents an opportunity to burnish their credentials as the champions of the developing world, in contrast with the United States, which has put its support squarely behind ally Israel.

China has consistently called for restraint and a ceasefire but has also sharpened its criticism of Israel.

"Israel's actions have gone beyond the scope of self-defense," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said this week, called on it to stop its "collective punishment" of Gaza residents, Chinese state media reported.

Russia has expressed sympathy for the Palestinians while blaming the US "I think that many people will agree with me that this is a vivid example of the failure of United States policy in the Middle East," Russian President Vladimir Putin said this week.

Both Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have sought to deepen ties to the global south, seeing economic

opportunities and possibly a way to counterbalance the diplomatic influence of the US and its allies.

That was on display this week as China hosted a summit for Xi's signature Belt and Road Initiative, which has lent hundreds of billions of dollars for infrastructure projects across the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Putin attended and met Xi for three hours of talks that included "an in-depth exchange of views on the Palestinian-Israeli situation", China said.

"China and Russia still see (the crisis) more in terms of the United States than in terms of either Palestine or Israel," said Jon Alterman, director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

"If the United States can effectively rally the world, it's bad for them. If the US and its allies grow increasingly isolated, they see that as good for them."

While the strategies of Russia and China in the Middle East are not fully aligned, they have much in common.

China signalled its growing influence in the Middle East this year when it announced a surprise deal on the restoration of ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Russia too has been improving ties

with Iran, which has included supplies of Iranian drones and common cause in backing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Both China and Russia share a history of support for the Palestinians - and are critical of what they say is the marginalisation of them by the United States.

"There's clearly a shared interest in emphasising the negative role of the US in the conflict," said Jean-Loup Samaan, senior research fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore. "And that fits within their broader narrative on the need to build an alternative world order to the US."

Russia's war in Ukraine gives it an added incentive to align itself with the Palestinian cause.

The United States has been trying, with limited success, to persuade the global south to rally behind Ukraine. Portraying the US as a driver of the conflict helps blunt that effort.

Alterman sees a similar motivation for China, which regards the US as its chief geopolitical rival. "China is trying to play the global south card, irrespective of its close ties to Israel. More than actually supporting Hamas, it is quietly helping build resistance to US efforts to build international support for Israel," said Alterman.

CHINA'S NUKE WARHEADS

Pentagon report distorts facts

says Beijing

REUTERS, Beijing

A US Pentagon report saying China will probably have more than 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030 was filled with prejudice and distorts facts, and China had no intention of engaging in a nuclear arms race, its foreign ministry said yesterday. "First of all, the United States report, like similar reports before it, ignores the facts, is full of prejudice and spreads the theory of the threat posed by China," ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a press briefing in response to a question about the US report. Mao did not elaborate. The Pentagon said in an annual report released on Thursday that China had more than 500 operational nuclear warheads in its arsenal, as of May. "China firmly adheres to a nuclear strategy of self-defence and defence, we have always maintained our nuclear forces at the lowest level required for national security, and we have no intention of engaging in a nuclear arms race with any country," Mao said. The report added that China's Navy had more than 370 ships and submarines, up from the 340 ships last year. "As long as any country does not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against China, it will not be threatened by China's nuclear weapons," Mao said.

HUMAN CHALLENGE TRIAL

First dengue pill shows promise

REUTERS

A pill for dengue fever developed by Johnson & Johnson JNJ.N appeared to protect against a form of the virus in a handful of patients in a small human challenge trial in the United States, according to data presented by the company yesterday. There are currently no specific treatments for dengue, a growing disease threat, the company said ahead of presentation of the data at the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene Annual Meeting in Chicago. "It is the first ever to show antiviral activity against dengue," Marnix Van Look, who oversees emerging pathogens research for J&J's Janssen division, said of the drug. In human challenge trials, researchers intentionally expose healthy volunteers to a pathogen to test a vaccine or treatment, or better understand the disease they cause. In the trial done with Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 10 volunteers were given a high dose of the J&J pill five days before being injected with a type of dengue. They continued to take the pill for 21 days afterwards. Six of the 10 showed no detectable dengue virus in their blood after being exposed to the pathogen, as well as no signs that their immune system had responded to infection by the virus over 85 days of monitoring. The five people in a placebo group, who were also injected with dengue, all showed detectable virus when tested. Trial participants received standard care from medical professionals where necessary, and the virus used was a weakened version to minimise symptoms.

Gazans await 'life and death' aid

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smoke billowing from the northern Gaza Strip.

The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the main Palestinian Christian denomination, said Israeli forces had struck the Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza City, where hundreds of Christians and Muslims had sought sanctuary.

Gaza's health ministry gave a toll of 16. There was no immediate word from the church on the final death toll. It said targeting churches that were used as shelters for people fleeing bombing was "a war crime that cannot be ignored".

The Israeli military said part of the church was damaged in a strike on a militant command centre and it was reviewing the incident.

In Zahra, a northern Gaza town, residents said their entire district of some 25 apartment buildings was razed to the ground.

They received Israeli warning messages on their mobile phones at breakfast, followed ten minutes later by a small drone strike that



Yemenis gather during a pro-Palestinian protest to express solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, in Sanaa, Yemen yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

hammered the message home. After another 20 minutes, F-16 warplanes brought the buildings down in huge explosions and clouds of dust.

"Everything I ever dreamt of and thought that I have achieved was gone. In that apartment was my dream, my memories with my children, and my wife, was the smell

of safety and love," Ali, a resident of the district, told Reuters by phone, declining to give his full name for fear of reprisals.

US President Joe Biden said Friday he expected the first aid for Gaza to pass through the Rafah crossing from Egypt within the next two days, under a deal he clinched to allow in 20 trucks of supplies for civilians.

But World Health Organization emergencies director Michael Ryan said Biden's 20-truck deal was "a drop in the ocean of need" and that 2,000 trucks were required.

The UN says more than one million of Gaza's 2.4 million people are displaced, with the humanitarian situation "beyond catastrophic" and deteriorating daily.

The conflict has inflamed passions across the region, with protests held in several countries.

Thousands flooded into Egypt's iconic Tahrir Square in support of Gaza, an AFP correspondent said. Protests were also held outside the French and US embassies in Tunis.

Removal of river commission

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strong stance against river polluters and grabbers.

People started to know who were grabbing rivers, and who were polluting them. The action taken by the commission also brought pace in the movement to save rivers, he said.

Iftekharuzzaman urged the government to rethink its decision, saying the impact of his removal will be felt for a long time.

The government move indicates it is not only giving impunity to those who are destroying rivers but also protecting them from criticism and ensuring that nobody can point fingers at them, he said.

He said the government is moving backwards at a time when rivers in Bangladesh and across the world are being recognised as a "living entity".

Iftekharuzzaman called upon the government to investigate specific allegations of river grabbing, pollution, and illegal sand lifting.

"It is the government's responsibility to uphold the people's rights, not to protect the influential," he added.

Although NRCC is a statutory body, "it has been made ineffective" by law, alleged Iftekharuzzaman.

The commission can only place suggestions before the government. It does not have the power to take action against the grabbers and polluters, he said, adding that the government is not under any obligation to implement the NRCC's recommendations.

But there is no alternative to empower the NRCC to ensure the safety of the people and their livelihoods, he added.

Dengue cases cross 2.5 lakh mark

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than their usual time, thanks to the shorter winter," he added.

Prof Kabirul Bashar, an entomologist at Jahangirnagar University, said since dengue has now spread to unions, local government bodies will have to be prepared to curb the Aedes mosquito population. "Equipment, logistics, manpower, and necessary training will be required in this regard."

Kholilur Rahman, former chief entomologist at DHGS, said the number of dengue infections is rising in rural areas, and these cases will start

declining at the beginning of winter.

"In the meantime and also for next year, local government bodies should take the necessary steps, similar to DGHS's approach against malaria, in which immediate action is taken as soon as a single case is reported."

"The government also needs to support municipalities so they can efficiently curb dengue infections by taking the necessary actions to identify dengue hotspots and destroy dengue breeding grounds before the start of the monsoon," he added.