

Surging heat stress for workers in Europe, Central Asia: UN

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A growing number of workers face exposure to heat stress, even in regions with traditional mild climates, the UN said on Thursday, warning that humanity was suffering an "extreme heat epidemic".

Data from the United Nations' International Labour Organization shows that more than 70 percent of the global workforce was exposed to excessive heat during 2020—up nearly nine percent from the year 2000.

In a fresh report breaking down the heat stress by region, ILO showed unexpectedly that Africa was hardest hit, with nearly 93 percent of workers suffering from excessive heat exposure on the job, followed by the Arab states at 83.6 percent and Asia and the Pacific at 74.7 percent.

But at a time when human-induced climate change is seen driving global temperatures ever higher—last year was by far the hottest ever recorded—the fastest changing working conditions were seen in regions not traditionally impacted by extreme heat.

Excessive heat exposure at work swelled the most in Europe and Central Asia, jumping 17.3 percent over the 20-year period to 29 percent, the ILO report found.

At the same time, the Americas, along with Europe and Central Asia, were found to have the most rapidly increasing proportion of heat-related occupational injuries, swelling 33.3 and 16.4 percent respectively over the two decades.

The findings were published as UN chief Antonio Guterres warned that "billions of people are facing an extreme heat epidemic—wilting under increasingly deadly heat waves, with temperatures topping 50 degrees Celsius around the world".

"That's 122 degrees Fahrenheit. And halfway to boiling."

'Unfamiliar threats'

The ILO report cautioned that "countries previously unaccustomed to

extreme heat will face unfamiliar threats which they may be ill-equipped to deal with, while conditions in regions already contending with sustained high temperatures will only deteriorate".

At a global level, nearly 23 million occupational injuries attributed to excessive heat are reported each year, costing an estimated nearly 19,000 lives annually, the ILO said in a report published earlier this year.

"Heat is an invisible force—a silent killer," Tuesday's report cautioned.

It said heat hazards both for indoor and outdoor work increases the "risk of health impacts such as heat exhaustion, heat stroke, cardiovascular and respiratory conditions, and death".

The report highlighted the impact of heat waves, which account for about 10 percent of overall excessive heat exposure globally, and which it said had cost 4,200 workers their lives in 2020.

In total, 231 million workers were exposed to heat waves that year—a 66-percent hike from 2000.

Europe, Central Asia and the Americas saw the fastest increase in exposure to excessive heat on the job during heat waves, with around 78.5 percent of such exposure happening during heat waves, the ILO report said.

"Excessive heat is creating unprecedented challenges for workers worldwide year-round, and not only during periods of intense heat waves," Vera Paquete-Perdigao, head of ILO's governance department which produced the report, said in a statement.

Manal Azzi, head of ILO's occupational safety and health division, called for "year-round heat action plans and legislation to protect workers" as

well as "stronger global collaboration".

According to the report, improved safety and health measures to prevent injuries from excessive heat in the workplace could save up to \$361 billion globally in lost income and medical treatment expenses.

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