

Smog veils Central Asia cities as smoky stoves choke locals

February 18 2020, by Tolkun Namatbayeva, With Christopher Rickleton
In Almaty



a heavy cloud of dark smog often blots out the view of snow-capped mountains in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek

Snow-capped peaks used to be clearly visible from the streets of Almaty

and Bishkek, two of the largest cities in Central Asia that both lie in plains surrounded by mountains.

But now a heavy cloud of dark smog often blots out the view as air pollution regularly soars to levels comparable to those in New Delhi and Lahore, even though Almaty and Bishkek have fewer people and industries than their Indian and Pakistani counterparts.

In the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, a city of one million, and Kazakhstan's second city of Almaty, which is twice as large, the onset of winter prompts a surge in pollution as people burn coal and other dirty fuels in stoves to heat their homes.

One of those monitoring the situation is Kyrgyz environmental activist Kunduz Adylbekova, who experiences the problem firsthand.

In the area of small private houses where she lives on the outskirts of Bishkek, the air quality is particularly bad.

"The air here has a kind of heavy feel," said Adylbekova, a programme manager at Archa Initiative non-profit.

Many locals use highly polluting stoves to heat their homes and boil water because they are not hooked up to mains gas. Large numbers of ageing cars and trucks exacerbate the situation.

In this district, readings of PM 2.5 —a measure of fine particles in the air—regularly reach levels that the United States Environmental Protection Agency defines as hazardous to human health.

Sometimes readings are four times higher than the EPA minimum "hazardous" level, Adylbekova said, with locals suffering the ill-effects.

"Residents are often ill, some suffer from lung problems."



The onset of winter prompts a surge in pollution as people burn coal and other dirty fuels in stoves to heat their homes

'We feel and see it'

The bowl-shaped topography of both cities helps trap pollution.

Even worse, both have coal-fired power stations that date back to the Soviet era.

But other factors have led to a massive increase in the smog problem

over the last two decades.

In Almaty, where gleaming skyscrapers reflect the country's oil wealth, many cite the huge growth in the number of cars since the breakup of the USSR.

Zhalgas Jakiyanov, a marketing specialist who works in the business district, said the growing pollution is "already having an effect on our health."

"We don't just feel it —we can see it," he added, pointing to the leaden smog cloud that hangs over the city.

"We need to switch to gas heating instead of using solid fuels. There needs to be more emphasis on spaces for pedestrians," Jakiyanov said.

Smog also afflicts the capitals of former Soviet republics to the south, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.



In Almaty, where gleaming skyscrapers reflect the country's oil wealth, many cite the huge growth in the number of cars since the breakup of the USSR for the massive increase in smog

Declare an emergency!

While environmental groups have long sounded the alarm, now that people can easily access real-time air quality measurements online, pollution has become a talking point, particularly on social media.

Governments have been slower to acknowledge the problem, however.

This month, an online petition demanding that Almaty's authorities declare the poor air quality as an emergency gained 17,000 signatures on

the first day.

The city administration responded by saying that it is looking into ways to modernise the main coal-burning power station to make it less polluting. However it said no decision on the upgrade will be made until the end of the year and ignored calls for an independent assessment of the plant.

Power stations account for just over a quarter of total emissions, the city administration said, while exhaust fumes from vehicles make up some 50 percent.

In Kyrgyzstan, authorities rely on Russian energy giant Gazprom to expand its gas pipeline network into new areas of the capital in order to wean house-owners off domestic stoves.

But activist Adylbekova said her family had to pay around \$500 to hook up to the network last November.

That is too much for many residents, she said.



An online petition demanding that Almaty's authorities declare the poor air quality as an emergency gained 17,000 signatures on the first day

So they continue to burn coal to heat their home and the sour smell of coal smoke lingers in the nostrils.

The city carries out regular raids on residents suspected of burning banned fuels, while Adylbekova argued this measure is "reactive, rather than a solution."

Kasymbek Kerimov, a senior inspector from Bishkek's sanitary department, led one recent raid.

He said that only residents burning toxic substances and used cooking

oil—not wood and coal—are fined.

"These substances can cause real damage to the respiratory tract and cancers," Kerimov said.

His team fined one woman around \$107—over half the average monthly salary—for burning left-over fabric from the garment industry.

She complained that authorities are indifferent to the challenges faced by local residents.

"We have asked the government about (installing) mains gas and plumbing," said Baktygul Beishereva, a housewife who wore a surgical mask.

"But no one is looking out for us here."

© 2020 AFP

Citation: Smog veils Central Asia cities as smoky stoves choke locals (2020, February 18)
retrieved 20 September 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2020-02-smog-veils-central-asia-cities.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.