

# URGENT ACTION

## HAZARDOUS AIR PUTS HEALTH OF MILLIONS AT RISK

The air in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, is so toxic that people's health and lives are in grave danger. Schools have been forced to shut down, respiratory illnesses are on the rise and people are having trouble breathing. On 13 November, the Air Quality Index in Lahore, the capital of Punjab, reached 556 – far exceeding the threshold for 'hazardous' levels, which begins at 300. The Government of Pakistan is assessing the air quality using measures not in line with international standards and so, people are not adequately warned or equipped as to how to protect themselves from the smog. The government of Pakistan must act on its human rights obligations and take urgent action to protect people from the adverse consequences of poor air quality.

### TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

**Minister (State) of Climate Change Zartaj Gul Wazir**

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Dear Minister Zartaj Gul Wazir,

*I am extremely concerned about the risks that the hazardous air poses for the health and lives of the people in this Lahore.*

*The government's failure to adequately protect people from exposure to this air puts their human rights at risk, including their rights to health and life.*

*A 2018 World Health Organization report has shown that children are especially vulnerable to the health impacts of hazardous air, because of their developing lungs which require twice as much oxygen, and as a result are consistently falling sick because of the air they breathe. Life expectancy is already thought to be reduced by 5 years for the people living in Lahore as a result of the poor air quality.*

*Given the potentially devastating impacts of poor air quality on people's lives, health and human rights, we urge you take the following urgent steps to ensure that people in Lahore are protected from the impact of this hazardous air, including:*

- *Ensure that the people of Lahore have access to correct information about the severity of the smog*
- *Implement the recommendations of the court-appointed Smog Commission of Punjab, including the Punjab Clean Air Action Plan.*

*Yours sincerely,*

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The right to health is recognized in numerous international treaties that Pakistan has ratified, including Article 12.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Articles 11.1 (f) and 12 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 1979 and Article 24 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child of 1989. Failing to respect, protect and fulfil this right is a human rights violation.

In his March 2019 report, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment described the components of the “right to breathe clean air”, which included monitoring air quality and impacts on human health; and making information about air quality publicly available.

Levels of air quality have been rated “near unhealthy” and “very unhealthy” for most of the year in Punjab. During the “smog season” – from October to January – air quality reaches “hazardous” levels, as recorded by multiple, independent sources including the air quality monitors installed by the United States Consulate in Lahore and the crowdsourced data collated by the Pakistan Air Quality Initiative. The high level of smog is neither a new problem, nor one that came without warning. Instead of bucking responsibility, the Government of Pakistan must treat the smog issue as the public health crisis that it is.

On 4 November, three teenage girls filed a suit against the Government of Punjab for the “violation of their fundamental right to a clean and healthy environment.”

In the petition, the three young Lahoris said the government had been downplaying the scale of crisis because its standards of measurement differ from what is used in other countries and accepted internationally. An AQI of 185, the petition adds, at the Meteorological Department station in Lahore is classified as “satisfactory” on the EPD website but counts as “moderately polluted” in China and India, and “unhealthy” in Singapore, South Korea, and the United States.

Previously, the State Minister for Climate Change has questioned the AQI data and has insisted that Lahore’s air was “nowhere as bad as being asserted by vested elements.”

Prolonged or heavy exposure to hazardous air can result in severe health issues including asthma, lung damage, bronchial infections and heart problems and shortened life expectancy – putting at risk people’s rights to life and to health, as well as the right to a healthy environment.

Low income workers, such as labourers, construction workers, farmhands, and marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable as the nature of their work forces them to be exposed to hazardous air throughout the day. The fact that health care is not easily affordable to all means that only those who can afford it will be able to access health care and other preventative measures to mitigate the effects of breathing in hazardous air.

The court-appointed Smog Commission in Punjab made a number of recommendations in May 2018 including the immediate adoption and implementation of the Punjab Clean Air Action Plan, establishing Smog Response Desks at district levels, adoption of appropriate technologies that reduce emissions of harmful pollutants from brick kilns. Those have only been partially implemented, if at all. Real-time data from the Environment Protection Department on air quality remains unavailable to the public and no efforts are being made to switch to higher quality fuel.

**PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET:** [English]

You can also write in your own language.

**PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL:** 3 January 2020

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

**NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN:** Group [Them/They]