

INDONESIA EXPANDS ITS PEATLANDS PROTECTION

JAKARTA: Indonesia has extended legal protection for its wetlands and peat bogs by expanding a ban on the conversion of these carbon-rich swamps into plantations. The move, if properly enforced, could drastically reduce Indonesia's sizeable carbon footprint and prevent a repeat of the annual forest fires that plague the region, conservationists say. A moratorium on new conversions of certain peatland areas has been in place since 2011 in Indonesia. But this latest revision signed into law by

President Joko Widodo, and issued Monday clarifies and expands the law, ensuring that all peatlands are covered and that companies must restore areas they have degraded.

"We want to avoid any misinterpretation of the existing regulation, which gives the impression that land-clearing is still allowed," environment ministry spokesman Djati Witjaksono Hadi told AFP Tuesday. Peatlands take thousands of years to form as layers of dense wet plant material com-

act into dense carbon stores. When these ancient swamps are drained or cleared by fire to make way for commercial plantations—such as for palm oil or pulp wood—that carbon is released into the atmosphere. Conservationists hailed the strengthened moratorium as a win for climate change. "This regulation will be a major contribution to the Paris climate agreement," said the World Resources Institute's Nirarta Samadhi, referring to a binding agreement on reducing emissions.

Norway—which pledged in 2010 to pay Indonesia up to \$1 billion if it preserved its rain forests—committed \$25 million to restore peatlands in the wake of the announcement.

The moratorium could also help prevent the outbreak of deadly smog from forest fires that shrouds the region every year, causing widespread illness. Peatlands are moist and unlikely to ignite unless drained.

Hadi said the new regulation provided clearer guidance, ensuring no burning or

draining was permitted. Fires deliberately lit in 2015 across Indonesia's forests and peatlands were the worst in nearly two decades.

Research from Harvard and Columbia universities in the US estimate the crisis caused more than 100,000 premature deaths in Indonesia and neighboring countries. The World Bank put the economic impact at \$16 billion—twice Indonesia's clean-up bill in the wake of the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. — AFP

SEX, LICE AND PUBIC SHAVING: NEW STUDY HIGHLIGHTS RISKS

PARIS: People who shave, wax, or trim their pubic hair are at higher risk of sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), but less likely to get lice, a study suggested yesterday. A survey of more than 7,500 Americans aged 18 to 65, found that pubic groomers had an 80 percent higher STI risk than people who leave their nether regions hairy.

For certain infections, including herpes and chlamydia, the risk was highest among those who groomed most frequently and "intensely", the researchers found. The study merely observed a correlation between grooming and STIs, and cannot conclude that one causes the other. But the authors speculated that shaving or waxing may cause "microtears" in the skin, creating easy access for viruses.

Sharing tools such as razors may also be a risk, they said, citing a case of HIV transmission between brothers using the same blade. "As a third possible explanation for our findings, individuals who groom may be more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors than those who do not groom," said the study published in the journal Sexually Transmitted Infections. Pubic hair grooming, it explained, "is correlated with an increased number of lifetime sexual partners and is viewed as a preparatory act to sexual engagement".

For the research, 7,580 people completed a questionnaire on their intimate hair-control, sex lives and STI history. Seventy-four percent of respondents were pubic hair groomers — 66 percent of men and 84 percent of women. The trial participants were divided into "extreme groomers" who removed all pubic hair more than 11 times a year, high-frequency groomers who trimmed daily or weekly, low-frequency groomers, and non-groomers.

'Genital normalcy'?

The main methods used were razors, scissors and wax. Men mostly used an electric razor and women a manual one. One in five of both genders used scissors. Groomers, the study found, were younger overall and reported a larger number of annual and total lifetime sexual partners—even more so for extreme groomers. They also had more frequent weekly and daily sex than people who prefer to go "au naturel" down there.

A greater proportion of groomers, 14 percent, reported having had an STI during their lifetime, than non-groomers at eight percent, the study found. For extreme groomers, the percentage was 18 percent. STIs included herpes, syphilis, human papillomavirus (HPV), chlamydia, HIV, gonorrhoea and a skin virus called Molluscum contagiosum, or MCV. Such infections can have serious long-term consequences such as infertility, certain cancers and higher rates of HIV transmission. On the other end of the spectrum, the team found, low-intensity groomers had a higher risk of pubic lice infestation.

This suggested "grooming might make it harder for lice to breed successfully," the team said in a statement. Better understanding the relationship between pubic hair grooming and STIs may help single out "high-risk individuals" for safe-sex education, the team said.

They may also be advised to dehair less frequently or severely, or to delay sex after grooming to allow time for the skin to heal. Pubic hair grooming has become a common phenomenon worldwide, with popular media changing people's definition of attractiveness, cleanliness and "genital normalcy", said the study. — AFP



NEW DELHI: In this Friday, Nov 11, 2016, photo, a pollution meter shows a perfect 10 as visitors to the Paharpur business centre, one of the Delhi's greenest office, sit in the lobby. — AP

INDIANS LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS WHEN TOXIC POLLUTION SOARS

'WE'VE STARTED TO GET THROUGH TO THE MIDDLE CLASS'

NEW DELHI: The truth of New Delhi's toxic air finally hit home for Rakhi Singh when her 3-year-old son began to cough constantly early this year. She bought air purifiers for her home. When a thick, gray haze turned the view outside her home into a scene from a bad science fiction film last month, she bought pollution masks. "Having a kid made the reality of the city's pollution hit me harder," she said.

The news that the Indian capital is one of the dirtiest cities in the world is three years old. But the awareness that it's toxic enough to leave its citizens chronically ill and requires long-term lifestyle changes is relatively nascent. The first week of November, when a thick blanket of toxic haze covered the city, did much to hasten that awareness. And with the awareness came a brisk uptick in the sale of air purifiers and pollution masks. As the noise and smoke from millions of firecrackers from the Hindu festival of Diwali died down, the city woke up Nov 1 to soaring levels of PM2.5 - pollution particles so tiny they can get deeply embedded in the lungs. Levels in the Indian capital averaged well over 900 micrograms per cubic meter, more than 36 times the level the WHO considers acceptable and 15 times the Indian norm.

Air purifiers

Manufacturers and importers of air purifiers and pollution masks say late 2016 is the first time they've had a serious number of Indian families inquiring about and buying their prod-

ucts. "It's only in 2016 that we've started to get through to the middle class," said Barun Aggarwal, who heads Breathe Easy, a company that assesses homes and offices in New Delhi for pollution and provides solutions such as air purifiers and indoor plants.

When Aggarwal started his business in 2013, he had no customers for months. Later that year the World Health Organization report describing Delhi as the world's dirtiest city was released. "In the last four months (of 2013) we finally managed maybe 50 customers," he said, adding that those first customers were almost entirely foreigners living in the Indian capital who came from cities with much cleaner air. This year he expects to hit close to 5,000 customers, with more local residents looking for solutions, Aggarwal said.

Other businesses show similar numbers. SmartAir, a company that started selling low-cost air purifiers in China in 2013, set up shop in India in early 2015 and sold 1,000 pieces of its basic do-it-yourself model that year. This year it sold about 500 pieces in the first week of November alone. Hundreds of people queued up outside the Vogmask store in a posh shopping area to spend as much as 2,000 rupees (\$29) on high-end pollution masks manufactured by the California-based company.

Year round problem

When the Indian capital topped the pollution charts in 2013, the city's first response was

almost defiant. There was a belief that pollution only sickened the city's expatriate population. "There was a strong defiance. 'I'm born and brought up in Delhi. This doesn't affect me,'" was how people saw the pollution problem, said Jay Kannaiyan, head of SmartAir in India.

"This year, that's gone out the door. Middle-class, even lower-middle-class Indians are looking at air purifiers," he added. But while awareness is growing, New Delhi's response to air pollution isn't very consistent. Air pollution is a year-round problem in the Indian capital, but it's only when the cold winter makes toxic air visible that people respond.

On days when the air so awful that one can see and taste it, the parks are empty and those who cannot afford pollution masks tie handkerchiefs or scarves across their faces. The week after Diwali, when the city saw its most shocking pollution spike in years, the SmartAir office and shop in south Delhi was open all night, with long lines outside the store. But on other days, when the sun shines and the haze lifts, most people forget about pollution. The masks vanish and the face coverings come off, even though pollution is often still way above government and WHO norms. "When the media stops talking about it and people see sunshine they start thinking it's OK. It's really not. It's terrible," says Singh. "Right now it's a completely a panic-driven market," says Kannaiyan. "People are only buying when it's so horrendous that they can't see their own hand in front of them." — AP



In this photograph taken on September 9, 2016, boathouse dwellers wash their charpoys and clothes on the banks of the Manchar lake, a 223 square kilometre natural water reservoir in southern Pakistan. — AFP

PARADISE LOST: HOW TOXIC WATER KILLED PAKISTAN'S LARGEST LAKE

MANCHAR LAKE: For generations the Mohanna tribe have lived, loved, worked, and played on Pakistan's Manchar Lake; their floating settlement serving their needs from birth to death. But an unrelenting flow of toxic wastewater is pouring into the lake—a byproduct of industrialization and aggressive agricultural practices upstream — and has slowly rendered it inhospitable, poisoning the water and almost everything in it. For fishermen such as Mohammed Yusuf, life on the lake is becoming intolerable.

"When we were young, our lives were very good. Every kind of fish was available. Our earnings were good," he told AFP. "When my father would go fishing he would bring back over a hundred kilos of fish. Now the situation has changed. The fish is extinct because of the bad water," he added. The wooden, flat-bottomed barge he lives in with his mother, wife, and their nine children, has ornate carvings but it has seen better days.

Now Yusuf barely catches enough fish to feed his family, let alone be able to save the money he needs to maintain his boat. He estimates they have just five years before it is beyond repair, fearing he will soon have to leave the place where he was born. And yet their whole life is packed into this floating home: Clothes and linen are stacked in the stern, kitchenware and food under the prow. Cooking is done down in the hold, on a little earthen hearth fed by the stems of aquatic plants. "If it is hot we sleep on the roof, in the winter we sleep inside the boat on the floor," said Yusuf.

Two cradles swing as the breeze softens the heat: the larger for his child born on board some 40 days ago, the smaller one for the Koran, a dignified place for the Holy Book to avoid desecration. Neighboring boathouses are anchored a few dozen meters away. Children wade or swim in the shallows while adults navigate the water in narrow wooden canoes, which they skillfully push with a pole. "We have been living this way for generations," explained the fisherman.

The size of Manchar Lake, one of the largest fresh water reserves in Pakistan, varies

depending on rainfall. It can measure more than 250 square kilometers after the annual monsoon. In the 1970s a series of drains and canals were built to carry sewage to the lake from several major cities in Sindh province, as well as industrial wastewater, and overflow from rice paddies full of pesticides and fertilizers. The system, known as the Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD), also dumps into the lake vast quantities of brackish water drained from the right bank of the Indus to make the surrounding land arable.

Meanwhile, mountain torrents supplying fresh water have declined. So too has the flow of the Indus itself into the lake, due to the building of dams and greater irrigation, explains Mustafa Mirani of the Pakistani Fishermen Forum, which campaigns for the protection and conservation of the lake.

As far back as the 1990s, assessments found the land and the water was being destroyed by a toxic mix of saline, chemicals and sewage, explains the activist, who grew up on the lake. It was then proposed to reroute the RBOD to empty into the Arabian Sea further south. But the plan has been suspended for years due to lack of funds, and dirty water continues to flow into the lake untreated and unabated.

The water is no longer drinkable. The pollution has killed off flora and fauna and it has become impossible to grow vegetables in the toxic silt. Migrating birds, which once came in their thousands to rest among the reeds on the lake, are now rarely seen. Fish stock has also plummeted. In the 1970s, more than 15,000 tons were netted each year compared with 2,000-3,800 tons in recent years, according to the Sindh Fisheries Department.

The number of the Mohanna tribe living around the lake has halved in the last 25 years, according to Mirani. "When I was growing I saw some 400 boats and that many families on them. All of them, eating, sleeping, marrying, all would take place on the boats," he recalled. "Now, because of poverty, they can't mend or repair their boats. So gradually all these boats are vanishing." — AFP

GERMAN COURT TO RULE ON NUCLEAR COMPENSATION

KARLSRUHE: A German court is set to rule on whether three big energy suppliers are entitled to billions of euros in compensation over the country's decision to phase out nuclear power in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima disaster. German electricity giants E.ON and RWE and Sweden's Vattenfall have argued that the government-ordered shutdown of the country's nuclear plants amounts to an "expropriation" of their assets.

They have asked the Constitutional Court in the southwestern city of Karlsruhe to award them some 20 billion euros (\$21 billion) in damages, according to media reports. Chancellor Angela Merkel's government decided after Japan's 2011 Fukushima reactor meltdowns to halt operations of Germany's eight oldest nuclear plants and to shutter the other nine by 2022.

The move marked a sharp reversal for Merkel. She had earlier overturned a phase-out ordered by a previous government in 2002 and extended the lifespan of Germany's nuclear fleet until 2036. The chief of Germany's biggest power company E.ON, Johannes Teysen, told the court in March that while the companies respected the political choice to give up on nuclear energy, they should not have to foot the bill alone.

"We cannot simply accept that parliament disregarded constitutional requirements by providing for no compensation," he said at the time. "For our shareholders—including many small stock holders who have their savings and pensions invested with us—this creates a significant financial loss which under current law will not be compensated for."

Leverage

The firms have complained that the losses came at a time when they are already struggling in the face of low wholesale electricity prices and compe-



KARLSRUHE: The first senate of Germany's Constitutional Court with its members (L-R) Yvonne Ott, Susanne Baer, Johannes Masing, Michael Eichberger, Ferdinand Kirchhof (chairman), Wilhelm Schluckebier, Andreas Paulus and Gabriele Britz give their judgment on compensation over nuclear phase-out. — AFP

tion from heavily subsidized renewable as part of Germany's shift to clean energy such as wind, solar and biomass. Critics however have countered that the big energy companies benefited from massive state subsidies when the nuclear plants first went into operation. At the same court hearing in March, Environment Minister Barbara Hendricks defended the government's position, saying that the Fukushima catastrophe had "necessitated a reassessment of the risks associated with nuclear energy". Observers said the outcome of the case

was difficult to predict, complicated by the fact that judges would also have to rule on whether Vattenfall's complaint was even admissible in a German court given that it is a Swedish company.

The verdict could have an impact on separate negotiations between the government and nuclear plant operators on managing the country's atomic waste disposal. Under a draft law approved in October, the firms Vattenfall, E.ON, RWE and EnBW would have to contribute 23.5 billion euros to a state fund for the storage of nuclear waste by 2022. — AFP