

International

Air pollution still killing 307,000 per year in Europe

Air pollution causes 7 million deaths annually across the globe

COPENHAGEN: Premature deaths caused by fine particle air pollution have fallen 10 percent annually across Europe, but the invisible killer still accounts for 307,000 premature deaths a year, the European Environment Agency said yesterday. If the latest air quality guidelines from the World Health Organization were followed by EU members, the latest number of fatalities recorded in 2019 could be cut in half, according to an EEA report.

Deaths linked to fine particulate matter - with a diameter below 2.5 micrometers or PM2.5 - were estimated at 346,000 for 2018. The clear reduction in deaths for the following year were put down partly to favorable weather but above all to a progressive improvement in air quality across the continent, the European Union's air pollution data centre said.

In the early 1990s, fine particles, which penetrate deeply into the lungs, led to nearly a million premature deaths in the 27 EU member nations,

according to the report. That figure had been more than halved to 450,000 by 2005. In 2019, fine particulate matter caused 53,800 premature deaths in Germany, 49,900 in Italy, 29,800 in



Invisible killer accounts for premature deaths

France and 23,300 in Spain. Poland saw 39,300 deaths, the highest figure per head of population. The EEA also registers premature deaths linked to two other leading pollutants, but says it does not

count them in its overall toll to avoid doubling up. Deaths caused by nitrogen dioxide - mainly from car, trucks and thermal power stations - fell by a quarter to 40,000 between 2018 and 2019. Fatalities linked to ground-level ozone in 2019 also dropped 13 percent to 16,800 dead. Air pollution remains the biggest environmental threat to human health in Europe, the agency said. Heart disease and strokes cause most premature deaths blamed on air pollution, followed by lung ailments including cancer. In children, atmospheric pollution can harm lung development, cause respiratory infections and aggravate asthma.

7 million global death toll

Even if the situation is improving, the EEA warned in September that most EU countries were still above the recommended pollution limits, be they European guidelines or more ambitious WHO targets. According to the UN health body, air pollution causes seven million premature

deaths annually across the globe - on the same levels as smoking and poor diet.

In September, the alarming statistics led the WHO to tighten its recommended limits on major air pollutants for the first time since 2005. "Investing in cleaner heating, mobility, agriculture and industry improves health, productivity and quality of life for all Europeans, and particularly the most vulnerable," said EEA director Hans Bruyninck.

The EU wants to slash premature deaths due to fine air pollution by at least 55 percent in 2030 compared to 2005. If air pollution continues to fall at the current rate, the agency estimates the target will be reached by 2032. However an ageing and increasingly urbanized population could make that more difficult. "An older population is more sensitive to air pollution and a higher rate of urbanization typically means that more people are exposed to PM 2.5 concentrations, which tend to be higher in cities," said the report. — AFP



BUENOS AIRES: Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez (center-left) and Buenos Aires province Governor Axel Kicillof (center-right) speak to each other next to legislators Maximino Kirchner (right), son of Vice-President Cristina Fernandez, and Sergio Massa, after the mid-term parliamentary elections in Buenos Aires. — AFP

Argentina's government loses Congress majority

BUENOS AIRES: Argentina's center-left President Alberto Fernandez called for dialogue with the opposition after Sunday's midterm parliamentary elections, with projections showing his governing coalition has lost control of Congress. Ahead of the election, there was widespread discontent over the state of the economy, which has been in recession since 2018 and was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Having already been in the minority in the Chamber of Deputies - the lower house - Fernandez's Frente de Todos (Everyone's Front) coalition looked set to drop from 41 to 35 seats in the 72-member Senate, based on projections with over 90 percent of votes counted. "If the numbers are confirmed, effectively we've lost the quorum in the Senate," a government source told AFP.

This would be the first time since Argentina's return to democracy in 1983 that Peronism - a leftist movement based on former president Juan Peron that now covers a broad spectrum of political leanings - would not have a majority in the Senate. Fernandez will now likely be forced to make concessions to the opposition during the last two years of his mandate in order to pass laws or make key appointments, including to the judiciary.

"We need to prioritize national agreements if we want to resolve the challenges we face," said Fernandez, adding that he would approach opposi-

tion groups to try to find common ground. "An opposition that is responsible and open to dialogue is a patriotic opposition." Nearly half the seats in the Chamber of Deputies were up for grabs, as well as a third of Senate seats, in Sunday's vote. Interior Minister Wado de Pedro said turnout in the compulsory election was between 71 and 72 percent.

'Difficulty ahead'

Fernandez had been on the defensive since the Frente suffered a bruising defeat in September's primaries, picking up just 33 percent of the vote compared with 37 percent for the main opposition group Juntos por el Cambio (Together for Change), led by Fernandez's predecessor Mauricio Macri. "These next two years are going to be difficult," Macri said Sunday, while assuring voters that his coalition would "act with great responsibility."

Fernandez "will have to negotiate law by law," said Raul Aragon, political scientist at the National University of La Matanza. He predicted the opposition would be open to talks though. "It won't serve them to not engage in dialogue, and appear anti-democratic" before the presidential elections in 2023, Aragon said.

Since the primaries, the government had been in damage limitation mode, announcing last month a deal with the private sector to freeze prices on more than 1,500 basic goods following street protests demanding greater food subsidies. It has also increased the minimum wage and family allowances. The government's supporters have been forced to keep a low profile during the long pandemic lockdowns. But pro-government trade unions and social organizations recently announced they would march in support of Fernandez on Wednesday, regardless of the election results. —AFP

US braced for verdicts from high-profile trials

WASHINGTON: The United States is bracing for the outcome of two high-profile trials featuring a volatile mix of guns, self-defense claims and racial tensions. One of the cases is being tried in the town of Brunswick in Georgia, a southern state with a segregationist past. Three white men are on trial for shooting and killing Ahmaud Arbery, a Black jogger, on February 23, 2020 after chasing him through their neighborhood in pickup trucks.

Gregory McMichael, his son Travis and their neighbor William Bryan say they were attempting to make a "citizen's arrest" of a man they suspected of being a burglar. Arbery's family and supporters have called it a modern day lynching. The other case is taking place 1,000 miles away, in the Wisconsin town of Kenosha.

The town near the Great Lakes was rocked in August 2020 by protests and rioting after police shot and severely wounded a Black man. During a third night of unrest, Kyle Rittenhouse, a 17-year-old with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle, joined groups of other armed men to patrol the streets and protect, as they put it, businesses from arsonists and looters. Rittenhouse ended up shooting two men dead and wounding another. Charged with homicide, the young man is claiming self-defense.

While the details of the cases differ, both involve what has become an "American norm" of "civilians toting around firearms to protect their neighborhoods," said Caroline Light, a professor at Harvard University who has written a book called "Stand Your Ground: A History of America's Love Affair With Lethal Self-Defense." "It has taken hold in the hearts and minds of Americans that armed self-defense is a right and a duty of so-called good citizens," Light said.

This notion is "at the very root of the nation," from the arrival of the first European settlers, Light said, and a right to self-defense has been codified in the laws of a number of states under pressure from the gun lobby. "But it disproportionately puts the right of weaponized violence, the rights of armed violence, into the hands of white, predominantly men," Light said. "And people of color, especially Black men, are in the crosshairs of violence," she said, "because there is this idea that you protect your neighborhood against threats, and that the threat is seen as Black."

'Black Lives Matter'

A video of Arbery's shooting added fuel to the Black Lives Matter protests which erupted following the May 2020 death of George Floyd, a 46-



NEW YORK: Emily Ebersol prepares a station for the families of victims of gun violence who are gathering at 'Where Do We Go From Here' to drop of memorabilia for the Gun Violence Memorial Project in the Jamaica neighborhood of the Queens borough in New York City. — AFP

year-old Black man killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. "A Black man should be able to go for a jog without fearing for his life," President Joe Biden tweeted on the anniversary of Arbery's death. Rittenhouse has also become an icon though on the conservative right, among those who condemned the protests against racial injustice and police brutality as being the work of Antifa or "anarchists."

In this politically- and racially-charged context, the prosecutors in the two cases have been walking on eggshells. Thomas Binger, the prosecutor in the Rittenhouse case, stressed to the jury that he was not questioning one's right to legitimate self-defense. Linda Dunikoski, the prosecutor in the Arbery case, has not outright accused the McMichaels and Bryan of racism in pursuing the Black man but said they were operating on the basis of "assumptions."

It took nearly three months for the McMichaels and Bryan to be arrested and they were charged only after a video of the shooting of Arbery was leaked online and sparked outrage. Rittenhouse left the scene the night of the shooting and later turned himself in to police. There is only a single Black juror hearing the Arbery murder case and the judge in the trial of Rittenhouse has refused to allow prosecutors to describe the men he shot as "victims."

Closing arguments in the Rittenhouse trial are scheduled to begin and many court observers expect he could be acquitted in line with the strict self-defense laws in the state of Wisconsin. "There will be widespread frustration and outrage," Light said of a possible acquittal. "I think we can expect to see a lot of protests." In Georgia, regardless of the verdict, the McMichaels and Bryan will face federal hate crimes charges next year. — AFP

Surprise election win could end Bulgaria's political deadlock

SOFIA: Hopes were rising in Bulgaria yesterday that a government can finally be formed, after the third general election in a year produced a surprise winner. With over 75 percent of the ballots counted from Sunday's elections, the centrist We Continue the Change (PP) formation, founded in September by two Harvard-educated former entrepreneurs, was set for a surprise win with over 25 percent of the votes.

"I hope that they will be reasonable enough to form a government... These are the third elections in a year which is too much already," graphic designer Lyuba Yanchuleva, 67, told AFP while walking her dog in Sofia yesterday morning. A series of scandals about misuse of taxpayers money relegated the conservative GERB party of three-time premier Boyko Borisov to second place with some 22 percent.

Elections in April and July had failed to produce a government, deepening voter apathy and pushing voter turnout to a historical low of under 40 percent, as the fourth and most violent wave of the coron-



SOFIA: Bulgaria's incumbent President Rumen Radev (right) and Vice President Iliana Iotova (left) talk to the press after the end of the elections in Sofia. —AFP

avirus raged in the EU's least vaccinated country. Analysts were however more hopeful for a coalition this time, despite a very fractured legislature in which seven parties gained seats. "This time we will have a government coalition of four parties," Alpha Research analyst Boryana Dimitrova commented Monday.

Disillusioned voters were not so certain. "Yes, the new yuppies are very likeable but who are they going to work with?"

72-year-old pensioner Petar Blagoev shrugged yesterday. PP's co-leader Kiril Petkov, 41, who said he's ready to become a premier, pledged to hold talks on clear priorities with the right-wing Democratic Bulgaria, with 6 percent, and the anti-establishment ITN party of showman Slavi Trifonov, with close to 10 percent. They will also definitely need some backing from the Socialists, who won close to 10 percent, analysts said. —AFP

E-scooters forced to slow down in busy Paris areas

PARIS: Rented electric scooters are being forced to slow down to just above walking speed in many areas of Paris under new rules coming into force yesterday, scooter rental operators said. In 700 areas in the French capital, including around key tourist attractions such as the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre museum, rental scooter speed is now capped at 10 kilometers per hour.

Scooters run by rental companies Dott, Tier and Lime, tracked in real time by geo-location, will automatically be slowed down to half their normal top speed once they enter the designated areas. The main criteria for picking the zones was the strong presence of pedestrians, the operators said in a joint statement. This included parks, gardens, streets near schools, squares in front of public buildings and of places of worship, pedestrian streets and busy shopping areas.

The death in June of a 32-year-old

Italian woman hit by a scooter in a pedestrian area prompted demands for tighter regulation for the vehicles. City hall threatened the three private operators that it would renew their licences only if they made progress towards speed limits, and also got users to park the scooters in designated areas instead of dumping them on streets and pavements at the end of the rental period.

Yesterday David Belliard, Paris deputy mayor in charge of transport, told AFP that the new restrictions were "a first step, but nowhere near enough". More slow-speed zones were needed, he said, including in areas where pedestrians, cyclists and scooter riders share spaces such as on the hugely popular banks of the Saint-Martin canal and of the river Seine, long stretches of which are car-free.

Every Paris district would supply a list of desired slow zones over the coming weeks, which would be passed on to the operators. The three operators have meanwhile made progress towards addressing the often anarchical parking of scooters. They now require users to take a picture proving that they dropped off the scooter in the right place, and have also created a joint 12-person task force to pick up scooters left randomly in the street. —AFP