

‘Blast-furnace heat every day’: Record temperatures cancel classes, widening learning gaps across Southeast Asia

By [Heather Chen](#) and [Kathleen Magramo](#), CNN

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Student Lim Sokha, 15, uses a fan to cool down during her class in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on May 2, 2024. Chan Tha Lach/Reuters

School this year has been difficult, he says, adding that stifling heat and high humidity levels in poorly ventilated classrooms have been difficult to endure.

“My classroom does not have air conditioning,” Sek Seila told CNN. His class of 43 students pass around mini hand-held fans during lessons on most days to keep cool.

“It’s very unpleasant and uncomfortable,” he says. “On some days, it can even get so hot that it feels like your skin is burning.”



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The hot weather has also been brutal in many South Asian countries where, [science shows](#), climate change has brought stronger and more frequent extreme weather events, like life-threatening heatwaves — leaving nearly half a billion children exposed and vulnerable.

A dangerous heatwave hit Bangladesh in April, shutting down schools across the country — many of which were poorly equipped and lacked essential cooling resources, such as fans and air-conditioning, to support and protect students from health risks like dehydration, migraines and heat stroke. More than 33 million children were impacted as a result of the heatwave, according to groups like [Save the Children](#) and [UNICEF](#).

The worst hit were poor children in rural areas whose families couldn’t afford devices like laptops and tablets to facilitate remote learning, UNICEF says. “It hasn’t been easy for many children in a country as hot as Bangladesh, where they have been facing blast-furnace heat almost every day,” said Sheldon Yett, a UNICEF representative for the region.

“This year was hotter than last year and we know that global warming is only going to get worse,” Yett said. “Besides serious health risks, we cannot ignore children’s education needs, which have already been severely impacted after the Covid pandemic.”

Poorest countries suffer most

The UN and its agencies say developing countries are at the forefront of the climate crisis and bear the brunt of prolonged extreme weather like heatwaves, tornadoes and cyclones, as well as severe storms and flooding.

“Every child has a right to a safe and healthy environment,” Yett said. “We want to see schools open for children to learn but everything needs to be done in a safe way.”



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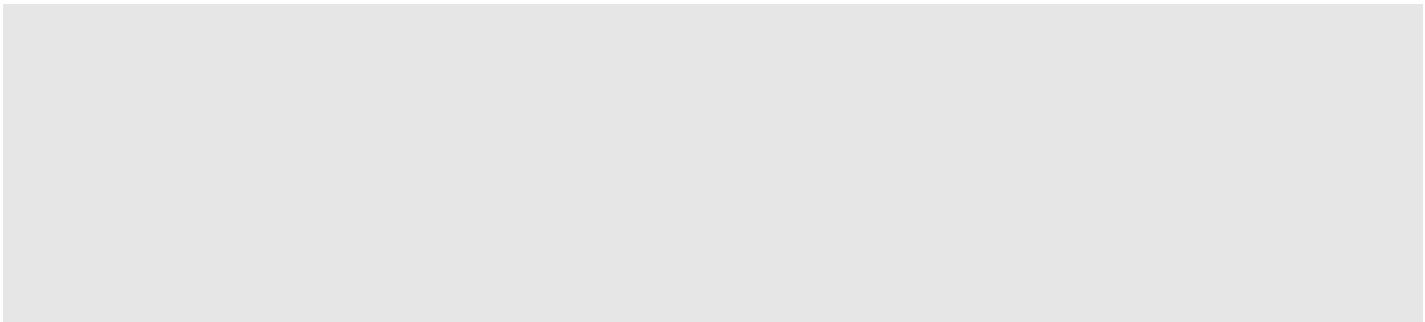
Planet endures record-hot April, as scientists warn 2024 could beat heat records for second year in a row

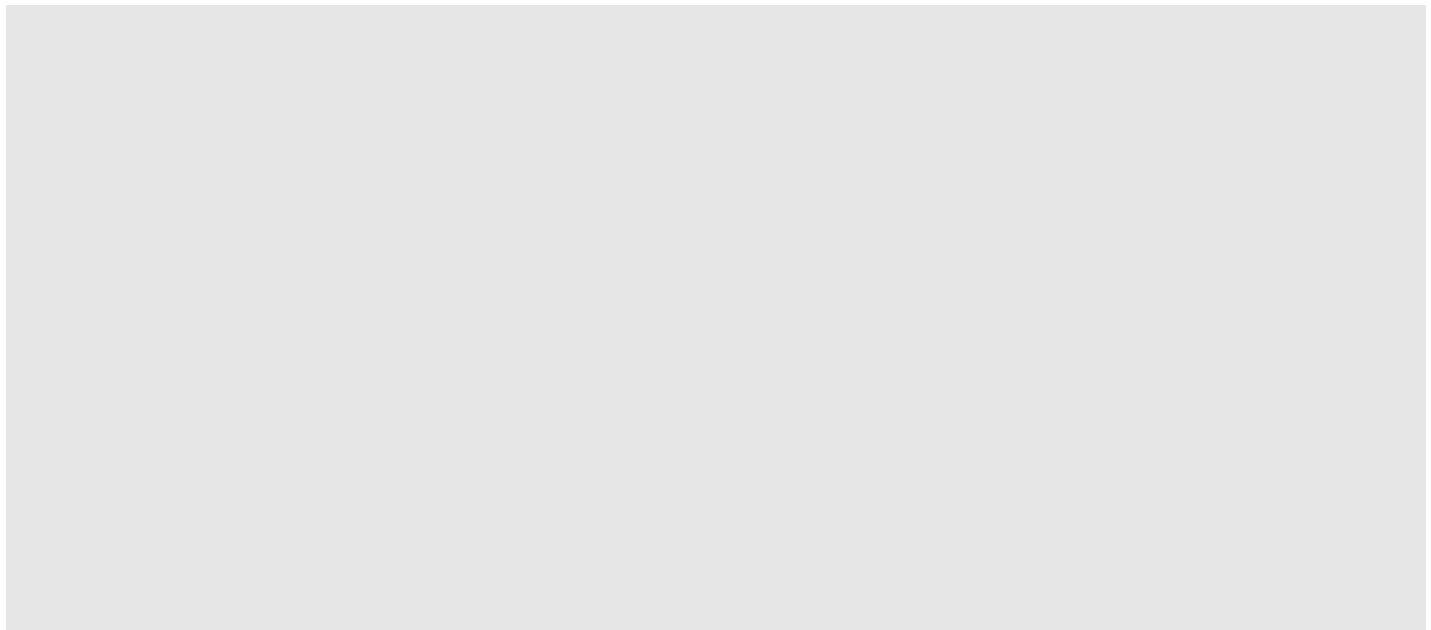
Experts and educators in Cambodia and the Philippines told CNN that March and April have been extremely difficult for schools.

“We don’t allow children outside when temperatures get too hot,” said Bong Samreth, who teaches at a public school in Phnom Penh. “But it can feel just as hot and uncomfortable indoors in classrooms without fans or air-conditioning,” he says, adding that he often sees students “sweating through their uniforms” at their desks.

“We do our best to look after them, especially the young ones, and the past few months have been very trying.”

Climate change continues to impact poverty rates and schools in the Philippines, often ranked as one of the world’s most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change and where schools are still recovering from some of the longest pandemic closures.





Children huddle around a small desk and mini-fan to take classes remotely as schools were shut amid extreme heat in Tondo district in Manila, Philippines on May 03, 2024. The heat index shot up to 53 degrees Celsius in some parts of the country. Ezra Acayan/Getty Images

The educational gap between impoverished Philippine children and those in urban areas has been widening, said child welfare and advocacy group Save the Children Philippines, adding children in rural areas, unable to attend school, have been at a particular disadvantage.

It also isn't uncommon to see groups of up to 70 students crammed into a single classroom with just one or two electric fans for cool air circulation and ventilation, the group says.



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Volunteers have also raised issues from students about insufficient clean drinking water at school, meaning they cannot keep hydrated during the day — as well as lacking shaded outdoor recreational areas.

“Classes have not been consistent,” said Benjo Basas, a social sciences teacher in Manila, adding that “almost the entire month of April” had been disrupted by massive school closures after heat in many areas became unbearable — impacting around 7 million children.

Students were unable to concentrate during class, Basas told CNN, an especially stressful issue given that important final-term examinations were just around the corner.

Miracol Mamat, a high school teacher in the country's northern Benguet province, said

mirasol mianaat, a high-school teacher in the country's northern Pangasinan province, said dozens of students had become sick after recent heat index levels — which measure how hot it really feels outside — hit alarming highs of more than 51 degrees Celsius (124 degrees Fahrenheit).

“For some impoverished students, we will do home visits to check in on them and deliver study materials like we did during the pandemic,” she said.

Governments urged to act

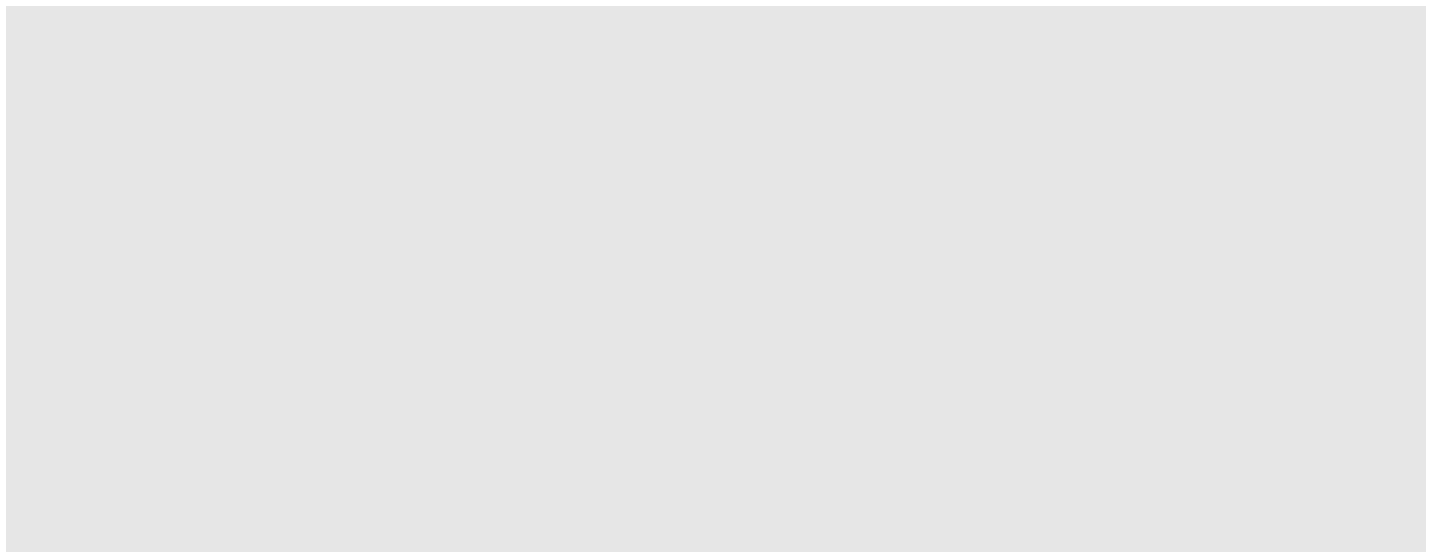
Governments in South and Southeast Asia have given practical advice on avoiding heat strokes and heat exhaustion, but few have come up with long term plans to address the worsening effects of the climate crisis.

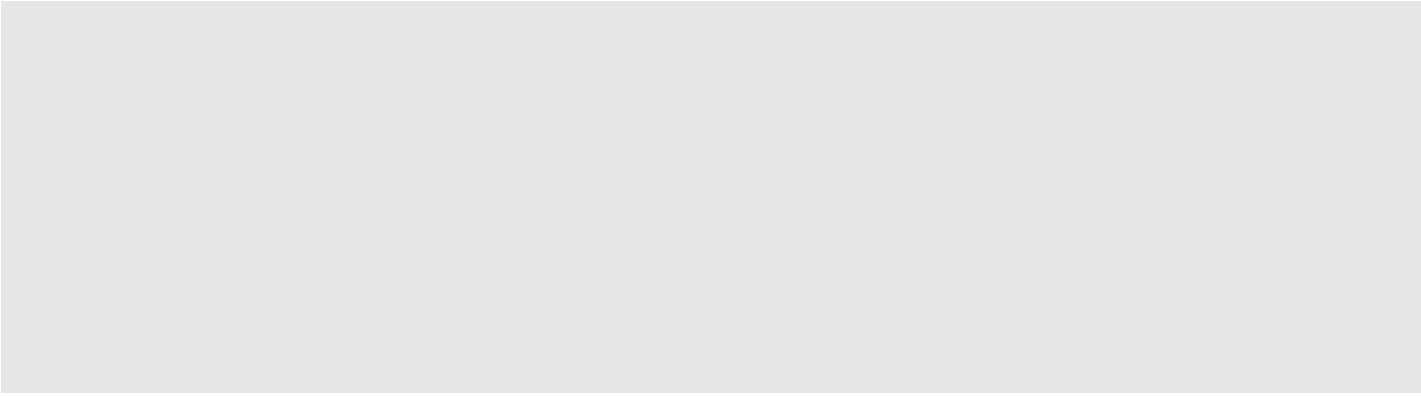
In a directive to all public schools in late-April, Cambodian education minister Hang Chuon Naron announced that school would be reduced by two hours during times of soaring daily temperatures.

Students were advised “to drink plenty of water” and to avoid staying out in the sun for too long “without sunshades or protection,” he said. Loose, lightweight and light colored clothing was also advised for students to protect them from sunburns and heat exposure.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on Monday said his administration is looking to revert the upcoming academic year to start in June and end in March, saying it “will be better for the kids.”

Much of South and Southeast Asia experiences the hottest temperatures in April, May and June before monsoon rains bring much needed relief.





A student drinks water outside a school in Banda Aceh, Indonesia on May 7, 2024. Chaideer Mahyuddin/AFP/Getty Images

Nonetheless, as extreme weather conditions become the norm, meeting the needs of children in poor and vulnerable countries is more important than ever, experts say.

“We always say that children will inherit the world but what kind of world are they going to inherit if it’s going up in ashes?” said Joy Reyes, a climate justice lawyer from the Philippines.

The impact of pollution driven by the burning of fossil fuels cannot be underestimated, climate experts say. There now needs to be “a fundamental change” among governments about how energy is generated.

“Governments have the responsibility of providing clean energy and infrastructure — it should not be left to companies or individuals,” said Glory Dolphin Hammes, CEO of IQ Air, an environmental research company that closely monitors global air quality, conditions and temperatures.

“Cleaner air, keeping climate change at bay — this needs to be the future.”

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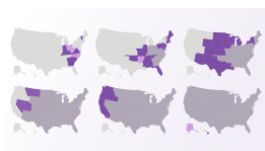


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