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Searing heat is back across Southeast Asia and it's not going away anytime soon

By Heather Chen, CNN

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Home to more than 675 million people across 11 countries, the region has seen temperatures reach unprecedented levels – with little respite from merciless heat and humidity, climatologist Maximiliano Herrera told CNN.

Thailand has been worst hit, Herrera said, adding that heat forecasts there have been especially dire. Temperatures across the country had been “breaking non-stop records” for 13 months – and heat and humidity levels were relentless, he said.

“We thought temperatures last year were unbearable but (what we are seeing) this year has beaten that – temperatures in Bangkok won’t drop below 30 degrees Celsius, even at night for the rest of April,” Herrera told CNN.

“The trend is inescapable. The region has to prepare for terrible heat for the rest of April and most of May.”

On April 3, as Thailand entered its annual dry season, the capital Bangkok clocked temperatures of around 109 degrees Fahrenheit – prompting many to stay indoors in air-conditioned comfort.



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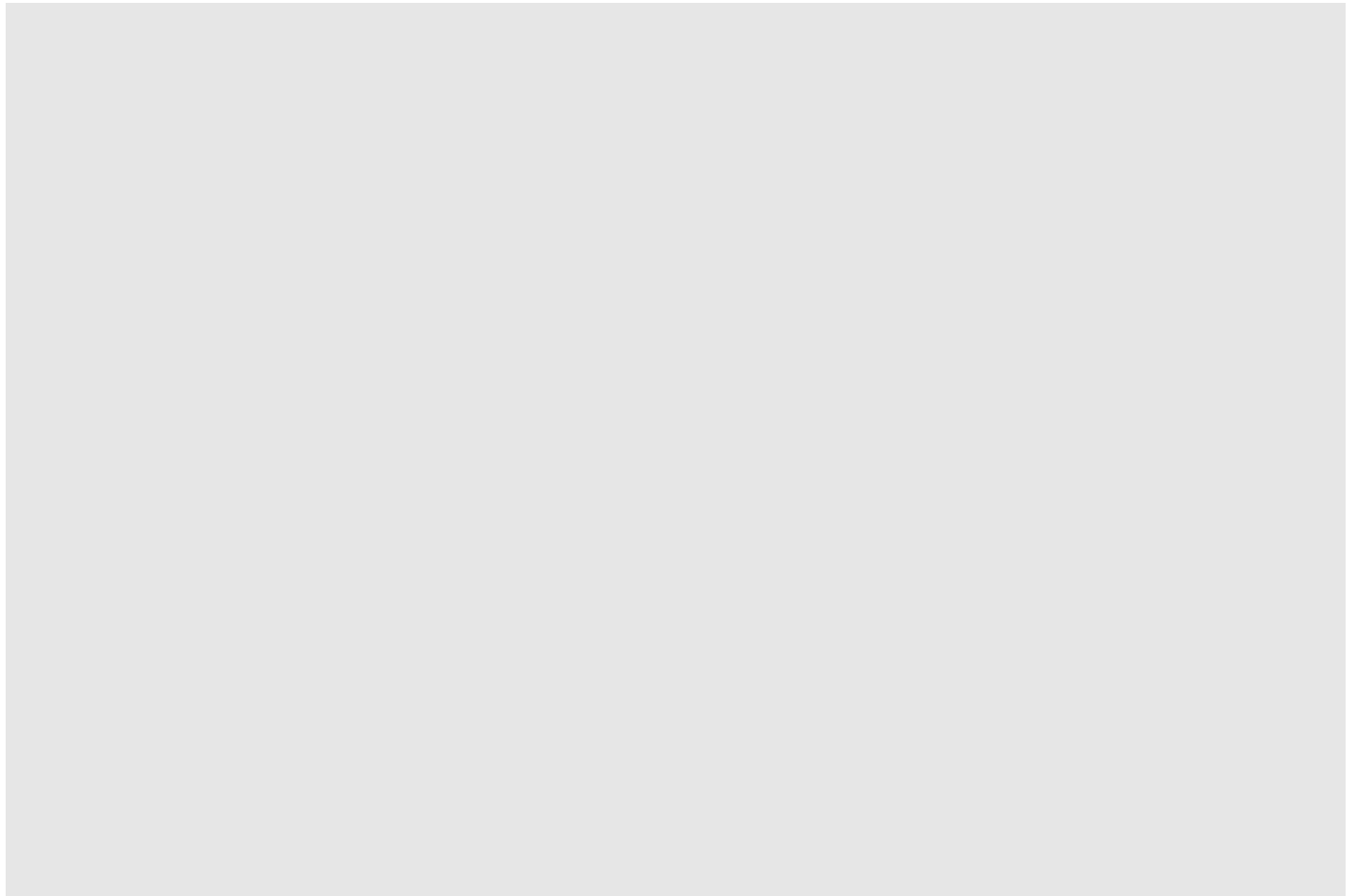
In nearby Vietnam, the heat wave brought intense droughts to the south – driving temperatures

in nearby Vietnam, the heat wave brought intense droughts to the south — driving temperatures up to nearly 104 degrees Fahrenheit and wreaking havoc on the country's vital agriculture industry. Vietnam is one of the world's largest rice exporters and low rainfall spells trouble for farmers in its Mekong delta region.

Rice fields and rivers have dried up, according to Vietnamese media reports, and farmers have been struggling without rainwater for their crops.

Record heat waves in 2023 caused severe power outages in several cities. This year, Vietnamese meteorologists have attributed the unusually long dry spell to El Niño, a natural climate pattern that originates in the Pacific Ocean along the equator and influences weather all over the world.

But alongside these natural variations, the world continues to blast through climate records, with deadly heat waves becoming the norm.



A resident attempts to pump underground water from a dried reservoir in Vietnam's central Ninh Thuan province during a heat wave and drought on April 6, 2024. Stringer/AFP/Getty Images

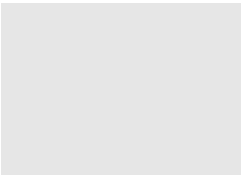
'No definitive end'

Though average temperatures in Southeast Asia have risen every decade since 1960, experts say one of the most worrying characteristics of the heat wave now sweeping across the region is its prolonged duration - with no end in sight.

Researchers from Swiss climate research group IQ Air attributed the current heat wave to “a combination of factors which include human-induced climate change and the El Niño event.”

“This phenomenon has led to unprecedented high temperatures across the region,” IQ Air said in a statement on April 5. “There is currently no definitive end date projected as an abatement to the heat will depend on factors such as weather patterns and (government) mitigation efforts.”

One mitigation effort being considered in Malaysia is cloud seeding, injecting particles into clouds – usually from an airplane – to make it rain.



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“Our air assets are always ready,” said Adly Zahari, the deputy defense minister. “Cloud seeding should take into account various weather factors such as cloud conditions and the wind before it is carried out.”

At least two heat-related fatalities have been reported in the country – a 22-year-old man from the northern state of Pahang and a 3-year-old boy, in neighboring Kelantan. Both died of heatstroke, according to health officials.

Officials in Sabah, a state on Borneo island, also reported close to 300 fires that started at farms, plantations and forests throughout February.

Climate change has made “Malaysia vulnerable to extreme heat,” the country’s Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said on the sidelines of a talk in late March following heatstroke cases. “We are thankful that we have not yet reached the third level of extreme heat waves but this could happen at any time.”

But there is still much to be done, say some living in the capital Kuala Lumpur.

Like many Malaysians, university student Aidil Iman Aidid has been trying to adapt to the ongoing heat, especially in recent weeks when he fasted for Ramadan. “This year’s Ramadan

has been the hottest and most challenging,” he told CNN, while staying hydrated was especially tricky, given that hot days “now feel much longer.”

“We are living in extreme weather conditions,” said Aidil, adding that he often woke up thirsty and tired after taking naps during the fasting period.

“There’s so much to be done and I really want to see governments across the region not just adapting (but also) establishing greater climate resilience against extreme hazards,” he said.

In Singapore, some schools have told students to wear cooler, looser gym gear until further notice, given persistently high temperatures in recent weeks.



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“We are continuing to monitor the heat situation and well-being of students and staff closely – especially those who may be more vulnerable to the effects of higher temperature conditions,” an Education Ministry spokesperson told CNN.

Similar actions were taken by hundreds of schools in the Philippines, including dozens in the capital Manila, that canceled classes after temperatures reached unbearable levels.

But watchdog groups have expressed concerns about children’s safety.

“Educators and local authorities have been forced to take the extreme decision to shut hundreds of schools because this extreme heat means children are simply unable to concentrate in the classroom and their health is also at risk,” said a statement by Save The Children Philippines.

“We need to see urgent action now to limit warming to a maximum of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

“Failing to do this will have dramatic consequences for children’s health, safety and wellbeing.”

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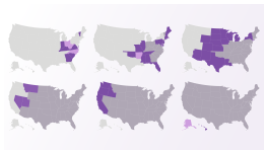


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