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Headline: Experts declare 'code red' for public health ahead of UN climate talks

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Humanity is at a "crucial turning point" to address the climate crisis and prevent millions of unnecessary deaths due to its health-related impacts, a top medical journal warned on Wednesday.

Over 120 leading climate scientists, doctors, and health professionals from top academic institutions and UN agencies issued a "code red" for public health in a study published in The Lancet.

In the sixth annual Lancet Countdown report, the experts gave a sobering diagnosis: changing environmental conditions have increased the risk of waterborne, airborne, and vector-borne diseases, as heatwaves, droughts, and storms will continue to result in higher rates of illnesses and affect harvest yield and food security worldwide.

The report comes less than two weeks ahead of the gathering of world leaders in Glasgow, Scotland, for the UN climate change conference. The high-level negotiations, which unfold with the COVID-19 pandemic at the backdrop, are seen as the last best chance to keep the world's temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius and avert a catastrophic planetary crisis.

The report exposes the existing health impacts and inequities, and underscores that the climate crisis will become the "defining narrative of human health."

"The [report] finds a world overwhelmed by an ongoing global health crisis, which has made little progress to protect its population from the simultaneously aggravated health impacts of climate change," it said.

By tracking 44 indicators of the health impacts of the climate crisis, the Lancet Countdown showed the need for a "clear imperative" for faster action that puts the health of the people and the planet above all else.

Data showed that the health-related climate impacts are already being acutely felt, most especially by vulnerable populations like children, women, the elderly, and those living in low-income countries.

In a six-month period in 2020, at least 51.6 million in countries already struggling with COVID-19 were affected by 84 disasters from floods, storms, and droughts, while record-breaking heatwaves have affected populations in the United States and Canada.

Rising temperatures have also led to an increase in the number of months conducive to the transmission of malaria. The warming world has also increased the potential of the dengue and Zika viruses to turn into epidemics.

“Through multiple simultaneous and interacting health risks, climate change is threatening to reverse years of progress in public health and sustainable development,” read the report.

Despite the grim outlook, health experts said the global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic presents a window of opportunity for world leaders to put climate action at the center of their response.

Current global decarbonization commitments, they said, remain insufficient to meet the 1.5 C target under the Paris Agreement. The economic recovery from the pandemic is already predicted to lead to an unprecedented 5-percent increase in greenhouse gas emissions this year.

The report said the funds committed to COVID-19 recovery should work toward the recent prescriptions of the World Health Organization for a health and green recovery to ensure that no one is left behind.

“Tackling climate change requires all countries to deliver an urgent and coordinated response, with COVID-19 recovery funds allocated to support and ensure a just transition to a low-carbon future and climate change adaptation across the globe,” it said.

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