

Air pollution kills Asia: WHO

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A smoky haze that shrouded parts of Southeast Asia this month, forcing schools and businesses to close, is just one element of an air pollution problem that kills hundreds of thousands of people in the region annually, the World Health Organisation said.

Air pollution in major Southeast Asian and Chinese cities ranks among the worst in the world and contributes to the deaths of about 500,000 people each year, said Michal Krzyzanowski, an air quality specialist at the WHO's European Center for Environment and Health in Bonn.

Drifting smoke from purposely set forest fires in Indonesia caused Malaysia to declare a state of emergency last week in two areas outside Kuala Lumpur. Parts of Thailand were also blanketed in the haze.

Malaysia said hospitals reported a 150% increase in breathing problems and seven people who had a history of respiratory problems reportedly died. The government could not confirm the smoky air was to blame.

Worldwide, air pollution contributes to some 800,000 deaths each year. The emergency in Malaysia was lifted after two days. But meteorologists are predicting a new cloud will hover over parts of Malaysia and possibly Singapore.

The haze, blamed on illegal dry-season burning to clear land on Sumatra island, is an annual problem.