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## Asian leaders call for tougher measures to combat air pollution

**By Michael Casey**  
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YOGYAKARTA, Indonesia – Asia's rapid economic expansion has turned its skies into some of world's most polluted and the region must do more to fight a scourge that is blamed for more than 500,000 premature deaths annually, delegates told a clean air conference Wednesday.

Some 900 experts and government officials from 20 countries meeting in the Indonesian city of Yogyakarta urged the region to impose tighter regulations on emissions, boost investment in public transportation, and introduce fuel efficiency standards to tackle air pollution.

“There are hundreds of millions of children and adults suffering from air pollution in Asia,” said Andrew Steers, the World Bank's country director in Indonesia. “It's not necessary and it's our job to do something about it.”

Increased burning of coal to fuel the economies of India and China, the millions of new vehicles clogging the roads in places like Manila and Jakarta, and haze-inducing land clearing fires on Borneo island were cited as the main reasons for the dirty air.

Pollution is having an economic effect. China recently estimated that bad air was cutting into its growth, and Hong Kong expressed fears that pollution drifting over from China is scaring off investors and tourists.

The World Health Organization said increased outdoor pollution in Asia is estimated to be causing as many as 537,000 premature deaths each year, as well as a rise in cardiopulmonary and respiratory illnesses.

“We can improve health by improving air quality,” said the WHO's Michal Krzyzanowski, noting a study in Dublin where a 1990 ban on coal resulted in a 15 percent drop in cardiac deaths.

The three-day meeting is not expected to produce any binding agreements, but government officials from 17 countries are expected to acknowledge the need to crack down on a problem that “is a serious threat to the well-being of people in the region,” according to a draft of the final statement seen by The Associated Press.

They will also embrace calls for harmonizing fuel efficiency and vehicle emission standards across the region, increased use of clean and renewable energy and the building of energy-efficient homes and buildings.

Speakers said progress was being made. Cities such as Bangkok and Singapore are embracing subways and skyways, while three-wheeled taxis and public buses in many cities in India, Bangladesh and Nepal have switched to compressed natural gas.

“Air quality is a battle that can be won,” said Cornie Huizenga, head of the Clean Air Initiative for Asian Cities. “There are a lot of examples from parts of the world where substantial improvements have been made over a period of 10 to 20 years. There is a willingness in Asia to do something.”

A study released Wednesday by the British-based Stockholm Environment Institute concluded that Asia is better managing the problem than in the 1990s. But it also found that the majority of the 20 Asian cities it surveyed still don't meet international air quality guidelines.

Dieter Schwela, the report's lead author, recommended governments first tackle the transportation sector because it is the biggest problem. He urged countries to adopt stringent vehicle emissions and fuel efficiency standards and regulate the import of polluting secondhand cars.

Schwela and others called for coal-fired power plants and factories to use cleaner fuels, invest in technology to reduce sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions, and improve their operating efficiency.

But introducing tougher air quality measures is not enough, delegates said. There must be a concerted effort to enforce whatever measures are approved – something that has proven difficult in many countries because of political pressure or weak capacity.

Pollution coming from China and other countries will have to be addressed by a regional agreement similar to the Convention on Long Range Transboundary Pollution signed by some 40 European and Central Asian countries.

But most delegates said this was unlikely anytime soon.

“The level of political integration is not to the point in Asia that it is likely that you will have real environmental agreements,” Huizenga said, adding that it took Europe 30 years to fully implement its agreement.

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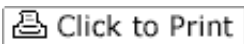
■ On the Net:

The Clean Air Initiative for Asian Cities: [www.cleanairnet.org/caiasia](http://www.cleanairnet.org/caiasia)

The Stockholm Environment Institute: [www.sei.se](http://www.sei.se)

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