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## With war and neglect, Afghans suffer from environmental problems

By Farid Behbud, Yangtze Yan

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The war-weary Kabulis bear numerous challenges including environmental problems and ecological contamination besides the protracted war and insurgency.

"These brick kilns are sending thick black smoke to the sky regularly, 24 hours a day without any break," said Abdul Wodud, a resident of Deh Yaya, a sub-district in the northeastern outskirts of Kabul.

"There are more than 1,000 brick kilns in Dah Sabz district and surrounding areas which cause enormous environmental problems in Dah Sabz district and neighboring areas including Dah Yaya sub- district," Wodud told Xinhua on Monday ahead of the World Environment Day which is observed every year on June 5 to raise global awareness of the need to take positive environmental actions.

In Afghanistan, continued drought and protracted war added to the environmental problems. There is no modern garbage disposal center to digest the garbage produced by some 4 million people in Kabul or recycle factories in Kabul and other big cities.

"We have had a beautiful view in Dah Sabz 20 years ago with dozens of grape gardens around here but we have lost them all due to drought and conflicts. Nowadays those gardens have been changed to trenches and cavities and those grape trees have been changed to brick kilns," Wodud

said.

The volume of pollution in Kabul city, where all political, military and diplomatic missions are located, can be gauged from the fact that a thick ply of cloud-like dust covers the city space almost every day.

"The environment and the air of our cities including Kabul are hugely polluted which is extremely hazardous to our health and even causes ailment and mortality," Ghulam Mohammad Malikyar, the deputy chief of Afghan Environment Directorate, told Xinhua in a recent interview.

The brick kilns have been denounced by environmentalists for a long period but the government has failed to close them down in the outskirts of Kabul and other areas nearby.

"We are being driven crazy with this situation, my children are sick, you know, those kilns burn rubber and old car tire, discharging poisonous gas to the area, causing the incidence of respiratory diseases in our neighborhood," Wodud went on to say.

Kabul, the capital of the war-torn but under-construction Central Asian nation, has not been spared, as poor civic amenities, battered streets and pitiable sewerage system have hugely contributed to the pollution there.

Environmental official Malikyar said that the rate of pollution in Kabul has reached the alarming level and warned "living in Kabul would be unsafe after five years if the status quo continues. "

Contrary to some developed and developing nations, Afghanistan faces no problem of greenhouse gases, rather the lack of drainage system and the surge of second-hand vehicles that have caused the air pollution.

And there is no chemical factory or plant in Afghan cities that produce carbon dioxide or other gases. However, burning tires in brick kilns, public baths, battered roads, congested streets, smoke emitting from vehicles and poor forestation campaign have been contributing to the polluting environment.

"Building unplanned houses, dense population and the lack of sewage system would gradually contaminate underground water in Kabul and eventually cause a variety of diseases," Malikyar warned.

More than 50 percent of Afghans are said to have no access to potable water.

Like security problems in the militancy-plagued Afghanistan, the high rate of pollution would also hurt people, said Abdullah Fahim, advisor to the Afghan Public Health Ministry.

"The polluted air in Kabul causes a variety of diseases including skin disease, eye problems and even lung cancer," Fahim told Xinhua in a telephone interview.

Fahim, who works as a medical practitioner, warned that the presence of lead in the polluted air would also cause brain ailment, affect digest system and cause heart problems.

"In the past we had nothing in this territory but a blue sky and limpid water in rivers in Kabul and across the country but at the present we have a gray sky and a river full of garbage and plastic bags here in Kabul," said Ghulam Hazrat, a Kabul resident.

"Since working in Kabul as a taxi driver over the past four years, I have gotten the respiratory problem," said taxi driver Farhad Mohammadi, complaining that "the Kabul municipality has set up a landfill on a saline area in northern edge of Kabul airport just beside a road which goes to Kasaba neighborhood where thousands of families live."

Mohammadi said the municipality authorities should have carried out a series of environmental recovery work in that saline area with salty mud, yet they changed it to a landfill and dozens of trucks discharge trash there every day.

"Several dozens of waste scavenger, including children, rush to the area to sort out for plastic, metal and other materials for selling. When I pass this area I close up my car windows but the malodorous garbage of the landfill drives me crazy," Mohammadi said.

Calling on Afghans to make efforts to keep the environment clean, a number of non-governmental organizations including a Kabul-based Green Club and Union of Afghanistan Youth, in addition to the government's support for greenery, plan to celebrate the International Environment Day by holding a number of programs.