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China's clean air campaign reduces global smog

BEIJING: China has reduced air pollution nearly as much in seven years as the United States did in three decades, helping to bring down average global smog levels.

The amount of harmful particulates in the air in China fell 40% from 2013 to 2020, according to the University of Chicago's Energy Policy Institute, which would add about two years to average life expectancy if sustained.

While smog in large swathes of the country still significantly exceeds safe levels, its experience shows how quickly progress can be made, researchers, including Prof Michael Greenstone, said in a report published yesterday.

About 97% of the world's population live in areas where air quality is usually worse than World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines, according to the researchers.

Smog reduces global life expectancy more than cigarette smoking, alcohol or poor sanitation, they said.

"China's success in reducing pollution is a strong indication of the opportunities that could lie ahead for other nations if they were to impose strong pollution policies, as some are beginning to do," they said.

The United States and Europe, which have been battling pollution for decades and account for 4.1% of the global health burden from airborne particulates, more than 90% of people live in areas that don't meet the WHO guidelines, which were tightened last year.

China's success, led by restrictions on car use and coal burning in major cities, has been rapid, with its 40% decline in seven years nearly equalling a 44% drop in US pollution over 30 years from 1970, after the landmark Clean Air Act was passed, the researchers said by email.

Still, Beijing remains three times more polluted than Los Angeles, the smoggiest city in the United States, and the national average for air particulates is six times higher than the WHO recommends.

Without China's declines, the world would have seen average pollution levels increase since 2013 instead of drop, the researchers said. — Bloomberg

Declining levels: Smoke and steam rise from a coal processing plant in Shanxi Province. A report says the amount of harmful air particulates in China fell 40% from 2013 to 2020, almost equalling a 44% drop in the United States over 30 years from 1970. — AP