**Grey, grey Lahore**

BY A S A D R A H I M K H A N 2021-11-25

WHAT wonderful weather we`re having, what fresh air.

Or so it would seem, to listen to Punjab`s environment minister. `In all of Punjab, there hasn`t been smog for a single second over the past two years,` Minister Bao Rizwan told a television channel some days ago.

Before choking Lahoris could cough up a smokestack to rebut him, Mr Rizwan provided a helpful explanation. `Basically, smog is the mixture of fog and smoke,` he said. `If there hasn`t been any fog in the past two years, it`s entirely impossible that smog exists here.

We`ll leave it to the environmentalists to figure that one out it might not be fog, and it might not be smog. Whatever it is though, the sky is grey, the air is filthy and the city feels bathed in disease.

That none of it is getting better is also odd: Lahore has always been the ruling class`s favourite child, to the great neglect of its cousins in the other provinces. There`s also a long list of bad guys to go after: dirty fuels and sloppy cars and brick kilns and cropburners and tree-cutters.

Instead, the minister went after the most powerful enemy of them all: whining citizens. `During smog season, some unscrupulous elements with the mala fide intention are trying to damage the image of Pakistan by reporting misleading/false reading of Air Quality Index,` he complained to the FIA.

Even still, this comes as a relief: by mentioning `smog season`, the minister has moved some distance from his previous position; that this tub of flying grime will be here for several months, rather than less than a second.

But as Lahore gets greyer and greyer, Takht-i-Lahore has moved to shut down offices and schools each Monday. This is, at best, a band-aid: living up to its Halloween billing, smog arrives each October, and doesn`t leave, visibly at least, until January.

The province treats it as a seasonal PR issue.

It isn`t: the air is dirty all year round.

There have been some half-hearted attempts to blame the mess on India who can forget state minister for climate change, Zartaj Gul, telling the Senate that the smog is part of `untraditional warfare`? That the data screams otherwise has gone unnoticed (Ms Gul previously chalked it up to greedy air monitor companies trying to sell us their wares).

There`s a history here as well: the PTI government`s tone-deafness follows Shehbaz Sharif`s 10 years at the helm, longer than any other. For the sake of wider roads and signalfree corridors, the great khadim chopped down Lahore`s trees with lightning speed.

One can forgive him for never having heard of old city planner Lewis Mumford, para-phrased here from 1955: that widening roads to fight traffic is like loosening one`s belt to cure obesity.

But the climax is a bit harder to forgive: having turned all of Lahore into a cement mixer, Mr Sharif shrugged and wrote to Indian Punjab`s chief minister the doughty Amarinder Singh to propose a `regional cooperation arrangement` for tackling smog.

It`s still unclear how thousands of trees would have reappeared, had this new Maastricht Treaty been signed.

In any event, it`s time if for the sake of Lahore`s 11 million sets of burning eyes and blackened lungs to address the issue. Per the UN`s Food and Agriculture Organisation, the lion`s share of air pollutant emissions in Punjab comes from transport (43 per cent), followed by industry (25pc) and agriculture (20pc). That means that while crop-burning is a very real bogeyman, it still comes in third.

The list of steps to fix it is endless: phasing out the import of low-quality, high sulphur diesel for its low-sulphur variant; smacking Big Auto to follow suit with low-emission vehi-cles; making oil refineries switch to low-sulphur fuel production; ending this country`s romance with hideous coal plants; regulating the industrial sector with green policies that go beyond PowerPoint presentations; moving towardspublic transit; restoring some semblance of tree cover; and actually stamping out crop-burning.

But these are generational changes, and they require a lot more blood and sweat than ordering long weekends each November.

There are also more than a few legislative headaches: keeping the land green and clean was passed off to the provinces af ter the 18th Amendment; it`s why the centre`s environment ministry got a facelift, and became the Ministry for Climate Change. But it will take no less than a national effort, involving almost all government sectors most crucially the Petroleum Division at the centre to get us out of this mess.

Finally, a core problem we`ve not found it in ourselves to confront lead as it does to smog in the air, drought on the ground, violence in the cities, and nearly any other national malaise we can think of is population.

As birth rates soar and cars multiply and resources thin and land becomes scarce, the crisis to come won`t be one that`s fixable. Now would be the time to do something about it. The writer is a barrister.