Mongolia’s new ‘cleaner’ fuel linked to deaths and illness

ULAANBAATAR: One cold night in October, Gerel Ganbaatar decided to stay with family members in one of Mongolia’s traditional gers on the outskirts of the capital—a decision which would prove fatal. Within hours of arriving, she and her parents both became breathless and nauseous. Gerel’s father, Davaasuren, called for help—but by the time medics arrived Gerel, who was four months pregnant, was already dead.

The 29-year-old’s parents were using smokeless briquettes to warm their home for the first time that night: A government-issued fuel made of coking coal from the southern Gobi region and washed coal powder—it has been linked to deaths and illness since residents started using the briquettes in October. There have been more than 100 deaths—mainly children, pregnant women, and the elderly—across Mongolia’s 24 gers. Nearly one thousand people have been hospitalized for air pollution. In Ulaanbaatar’s outer slum districts, prompting fears the fuel can cause carbon monoxide poisoning.

Gerel’s grieving mother, Jargalsaikhan, warns the fuel should be used with care: “I have heard of all of this, we have never made this decision which would prove fatal. We have always been suffocated,” she says. The city’s emergency unit said issues were easing once people were told “the correct ways to burn the briquettes.”

“People are using the briquettes just like the old raw coal, (but) the briquettes are ready to move is already having a positive impact on the environment,” associate professor at the National University of Mongolia, Sonomdagva, told AFP.

The government has also promised to distribute free smoke detectors in ger districts.

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