# San Pedro Sula Faces Crisis with Highest Air Pollution Levels in the Americas



San Pedro Sula, the second-largest city in Honduras, is experiencing extreme air pollution levels that have been deemed the highest on the American continent. The Swiss air-quality organization IQAir reported on May 17, 2024, that the levels of PM2.5 particulates in the city's air reached 249.1 µg/m³ this week. This level vastly surpasses the World Health Organization's (WHO) guideline, which limits annual mean concentrations to 5 µg/m³.

The severe pollution has led Honduran authorities to raise the threat level to its highest, advising residents to stay indoors and shut windows. Public and private schools have been temporarily closed due to the health risks, as stated by Education Secretary Daniel Sponda. The Health Secretariat has noted a 20% increase in patients with respiratory infections.

Dr. Cristobal Bustamante, National Director of the Emergency Medical Unit of the Honduran Permanent Contingency Commission, highlighted an increase in respiratory emergencies among vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly. He also mentioned a rise in cardiac complications and asthma exacerbations.

The heavy smog has caused operational disruptions, including the closure of several airports and the diversion of flights intended to land in San Pedro Sula. Abraham Manun, head of operations at Ramón Villeda Morales International Airport, indicated that many flights had been canceled or rerouted due to the poor visibility.

The pollution is attributed to forest fires exacerbated by the El Niño phenomenon, which has heightened temperatures and drought conditions across the "dry corridor" of Central America, encompassing Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. In 2024, Honduras has witnessed 2,598 wildfires, destroying 211,292 hectares.

La Tigra National Park near Tegucigalpa suffered significant damage from fires in late March, further impacting local ecosystems. Juan José Reyes from Copeco’s early warning system stressed that without changes in environmental policies, such occurrences could become regular, endangering millions.

The International Federation of the Red Cross cautioned about a surge in climate-related disasters in Central America, with climate change exacerbating weather extremes.