

East Asia hit by heatwaves as climate change pushes temperatures to record highs

Ben McGrath
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Devastating heatwaves have gripped many parts of East Asia in recent weeks as the region experiences record-high temperatures during the Northern Hemisphere's summer. Human-driven climate change is resulting in more extreme weather, which disproportionately impacts the working class and the poor.

On August 2, South Korea experienced its hottest day since records began in 1904, with temperatures reaching 42.5 degrees Celsius (108.5 degrees Fahrenheit) in the city of Yangsan, South Gyeongsang Province. At least 30 people have died from heat-related illnesses since May while more than three thousand have been hospitalized. Many of these are farmers and workers. At least seven people have died in rice paddies or farm fields while six have died at work sites.

For the past few weeks, heat warnings have been issued on a daily basis, urging people to limit outdoor activity. However, many workers, such as those in construction and logistics, are unable to seek refuge from the heat.

A construction worker at a site in Gwacheon, just south of Seoul, told the *Korea Times*, "If you say you're feeling unwell and need a break, what you'll probably hear is, 'You don't have to come back tomorrow.' That's why everyone just keeps their head down and works."

A package delivery worker similarly explained, "In summer, the temperature inside the cargo area [of the delivery truck] easily exceeds 50 degrees Celsius (122°F). Just loading and unloading packages is an ordeal even before the actual deliveries begin." He continued: "But I can't stop working. Failing to meet the required quota results in a penalty, while taking a day off means a cut in pay."

The unions have done nothing to protect workers. Instead, they appeal to the Lee Jae-myung administration to enact and enforce laws to supposedly allow workers to take breaks when the weather is too hot. For example, Park Se-jung, head of occupational safety and health at the Federation of Korean Construction Industry Workers' Unions, stated "The right to take breaks must be guaranteed by law so that workers can rest without worrying about losing wages."

Such statements are an exercise in obfuscation. They cover up the reality that the ruling elite views workers' health and lives as expendable in the pursuit of profit. The unions' calls for additional safety measures are meant to give the impression that reforms can be won by appealing to the state while blocking any action to mobilize workers independently against the conditions they face.

This is not solely a South Korean phenomenon. Workers are being kept on the job under unsafe conditions in other parts of Asia as well. On Sunday afternoon in Hong Kong, temperatures measured at the Hong Kong Observatory in Tsim Sha Tsui reached a record 36.9°C (98.42°F), the highest since 1884. In Sheung Shui, temperatures reached 39.8°C (103.64°F).

A framework supposedly exists for curtailing or suspending work outside or indoors without air conditioning when temperatures reach certain levels. Utilizing the Hong Kong Heat Index, there are three levels in escalating order: amber, red and black. The system was introduced in 2023 and has been triggered more than 200 times, though red and black alerts have never been issued, including during the recent record-high temperatures.

Lam Chiu-ying, who headed the Hong Kong Observatory from 2003 to 2009, said the heat index underestimates the effects of solar radiation, "making it

unsuitable for outdoor work environments,” according to the *Hong Kong Free Press*. Lam added, “If even record-breaking temperatures fail to trigger [the red warning], is it not just a decorative display piece?”

Chau Sze-kit, chairman of the Hong Kong Construction Industry Employees General Union, stated that despite the heat, “Many workers would not dare to take a rest for fear of being regarded as lazy by the contractors.” Yet just like in South Korea, the unions in Hong Kong have not put forward a plan to organize workers against these conditions, but keep them on the job with vague promises of addressing the issue with the government and employers.

Other parts of China have also seen extremely high temperatures. On August 7, temperatures in northeast Dalian reached a record 37°C (98.6°F), which is nearly 10 degrees above the average August high. Power consumption across the country have also reached record levels in recent weeks. In July, Guangdong became the first province in the country to exceed 100 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity consumption, totaling 100.798 billion kilowatt-hours.

Last year, China also experienced its hottest year on record. The national average reached 22.31°C (72.16°F), the highest since record-keeping began in 1961, according to the China Meteorological Administration.

Temperatures in Japan are also setting new records. The single hottest day came last year in the city of Isesaki, Gunma Prefecture where heat reached 41.8°C (107.24°F). This July was marked by a record five consecutive days of temperatures over 40°C. Kumamoto, which was struck by an earthquake on July 28, experienced its highest temperature on record on August 3. More than 8,500 remain in emergency shelters and 45,000 households do not have water.

In April, the Japan Meteorological Agency coined the new term *kokushobi* or “brutally hot day” to draw public attention to the fact that days over 40°C are no longer rare occurrences but increasingly common. As many as 1,521 people died from heatstroke in 2025, the fourth year in a row that the figure surpassed one thousand.

A report released in June 2025 by the World Meteorological Organization stated that Asia is warming twice as fast as the global average. This is leading to prolonged heatwaves, melting glaciers and

rising sea levels. In some areas of the continent, it has led to more intense rains while in other areas more droughts.

O Jae-ho, CEO of Nano Weather and emeritus professor at Pukyong National University in South Korea, told the *DongA Science* magazine, “Climate disasters are no longer isolated events; they are compound disasters in which heatwaves, drought, wildfires, and water quality deterioration occur in succession.”

The world’s seas last month were hotter than any previous July on record, reaching 20.96°C, beating a figure set in 2023. This has in part been driven by this year’s El Niño weather pattern in the Pacific, which is a natural warming of eastern and central Pacific waters leading to warmer global temperatures. This year’s El Niño is predicated to become the strongest on record.

Mariam Zachariah, a researcher at Imperial College, London, stated in the *Guardian*, “Extreme heat in Asia is the result of several factors working together. While El Niño can temporarily raise temperatures by suppressing rainfall, the main driver is long-term human-induced climate change.”



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