

## Punjab schools closed till November 17 amid smog crisis



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To combat the ongoing health concerns, the Punjab government has ordered the closure of all schools (primary to 12th grade) until November 17. According to senior Punjab minister, high schools in Lahore, Gujranwala, Faisalabad, and Multan have been closed until November 17.

Additionally, 50% of staff in government and private offices will work remotely, and all official meetings will be held online. Due to increasing smog levels in Punjab, half of the staff at both

government and private offices will work from home, while several schools have been closed in affected cities. Senior Provincial Minister Maryam Aurangzeb further said that schools will arrange online classes for students during this period. Addressing a press conference, Maryam Aurangzeb noted that the burning of crop residue is contributing significantly to the smog. While there is a ban on plastic bags, violations continue to occur. She mentioned that despite schools being closed for primary-level students, parents are taking children to shopping malls and entertainment areas. She also announced that the use of masks would now be mandatory.

Maryam Aurangzeb explained that winds from India's Rajasthan and other regions have affected Multan and Gujranwala. The Air Quality Index in Lahore was recorded above 1,000 today, and the intensity of the smog is expected to continue for the next 10 days. The senior minister also confirmed that 50% of staff in government and private offices would work from home, with all government meetings now taking place via Zoom. To combat the issue, all relevant departments have been given specific targets, and a Smog War Room has been set up at the Environmental Protection Agency to monitor air pollution levels. In response to a question, Maryam Aurangzeb clarified that Maryam Nawaz Sharif had undergone throat surgery last year, and six months ago, she experienced a reoccurrence of an infection. Maryam Nawaz Sharif is now in Geneva for treatment and will return to Pakistan on November 12. She emphasised that despite her health

challenges, Maryam Nawaz Sharif had continued to serve the people of Punjab. She also clarified that the notion that Maryam Nawaz Sharif had gone to London due to smog was incorrect. Air pollution levels in Lahore hit a record high on Saturday, with officials warning that the smog-choked city's air quality is nearly 40 times above the World Health Organisation's (WHO) acceptable limit. The level of deadly PM2.5 pollutants – fine particulate matter in the air that causes the most damage to health – peaked at 610, with a reading above 15 in a 24-hour period considered unhealthy by the WHO. For days, the city has been enveloped by smog, a mix of fog and pollutants caused by low-grade diesel fumes, smoke from seasonal agricultural burning and winter cooling. The air quality index, which measures a range of pollutants, spiked at 1,067 – well above the level of 300 considered 'dangerous' – according to data from IQAir.