

As part of World Environment Day, the United Nations has charged world governments with breaching human rights in their attitudes towards harmful air pollution.

As reported in The Times, 5th June 2019 - Clean Air For All Campaign

"Air pollution is violation of human rights, says UN"

The failure of governments across the world to ensure their citizens breathe clean air is a "violation of the rights to life, health and wellbeing", according to the UN's special representative on human rights and the environment.

David Boyd called on countries to take urgent action on air quality to fulfil their obligations on rights, noting that every five seconds on average a person died prematurely somewhere in the world because of air pollution.

The UN is making air pollution a focus of this year's World Environment Day, which is today and is an annual event organised by the UN to encourage worldwide awareness and action on environmental issues.

Mr Boyd last month attacked the UK government, accusing it of being a "laggard and a scofflaw".

Speaking to The Times at the start of this newspaper's Clean Air for All Campaign, he said it was "frankly embarrassing" that courts had ruled three times since 2015 that the government was failing its citizens by producing air quality plans so weak that they breached its legal duty.

In a statement yesterday, Mr Boyd said the right to breathe uncontaminated air was a core component of the right to a healthy environment, together with clean water and adequate sanitation and healthy and sustainably produced food.

He said: "In celebration of World Environment Day, I urge states to take bold action to beat air pollution, improve health, address climate change and fulfil their human rights obligations."

He added that the right to a healthy environment was "fundamental to human wellbeing and is legally recognised by over 150 states at the national and regional levels. It should be globally reaffirmed to ensure the enjoyment of this right by everyone, everywhere, while upholding the human rights principles of universality and non-discrimination."

Mr Boyd reiterated his recommended measures for reducing air pollution, contained in a report to the UN Human Rights Council in March. These include better monitoring of air quality and impacts on human health and establishing effective air quality legislation.

His recommendations chime with several of the objectives of this newspaper's campaign, including our call for a new Clean Air Act to confer a legal right to unpolluted air for everyone in the UK and a pollution monitor in every postcode.

Air pollution is also a serious health threat inside millions of UK homes, according to a survey published today.

Toxic chemicals leak from furniture, carpets, paint and varnish and cause almost half of all homes to have levels of indoor pollution that affect people with a vulnerability, such as asthma sufferers, the survey found.

Airtopia, a social enterprise that carries out air quality audits of homes, studied 47 properties in Birmingham, London and the home counties and found that 45 per cent had levels of volatile organic compounds such as formaldehyde above 1,000 micrograms per cubic metre.

Stephen Holgate, clinical professor of immunopharmacology at the University of Southampton, who is leading a review of indoor air pollution by the Royal College of Physicians, said: "The data in this report reveals the scale of the indoor air pollution challenge.

"Indoor air pollution is being linked to many adverse health effects, including asthma, cardiovascular disorders, thyroid disease, diabetes, impaired cognition and cancer."

UK 'cheating' on climate change goals

The government has been accused of trying to "cheat" on meeting climate targets by using overachievement on previous goals to make it easier to hit future ones.

Ministers have decided to reject the recommendation of the Committee on Climate Change, the government-appointed advisory body, which said that so-called "surplus emissions" should not be carried forward, according to the Financial Times.

The UK's emissions from 2013-2017 were 384 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, or 14 per cent, below the official target for that period. Under the rules governing the UK's five-year targets, such a surplus can be carried forward to offset any shortfall in meeting a future target.

The newspaper said that Philip Hammond, the chancellor, wanted to carry forward 88 million tonnes of surplus emissions. Caroline Lucas, the Green MP, said: "Britain will never be taken seriously as a climate leader if it cheats in this way. Nor will we reach the essential goal of reaching net zero emissions by 2050."

A government spokesman said that work was continuing with the Committee on Climate Change on how best to deliver "world-leading carbon targets".