News
EarthBeat



Cows graze as steam rises from the cooling towers of a coal-fired power plant in Middelburg, South Africa, May 20, 2018. (CNS/Reuters/Siphiwe Sibeko)



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Doctors have warned Cardinal Stephen Brislin, the new archbishop of the Archdiocese of Johannesburg in South Africa, about the growing health hazards related to air pollution emanating from the city's increasing reliance on coal for electricity generation. Brislin has advocated that South Africa should switch to renewable energy as a way of reducing climate related risks in accordance with church teachings in *Laudato Si*'.

"We need to be able to encourage our government to be more conscious of the protection of the environment; our energy production is very dependent on coal and this is damaging the air. When I went to see the doctor recently when I moved here, one of the things he said to me is that the air here in Johannesburg is notoriously bad because of pollution and this is affecting people's respiratory system," Brislin said.

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Brislin moved in January to Johannesburg — South Africa's largest city which is home to about one million Catholics — from Cape Town where he was archbishop for 14 years. Built on the foundation of a gold discovery in 1886, Johannesburg is now one of Africa's largest cities with the poorest air quality due to pollution from coal-fired electricity generating stations. This contributes to a reduction in the life expectancy of citizens in the city by more than three years, with children at greater risk, say researchers from the University of the Witwatersrand.

An immediate switch from coal seems unlikely as Africa's most industrialized nation has exempted its power utility, Eskom, from emissions curbs and laws, with South Africa instead ramping up its usage of coal.

Bernadette Kubran, head of the Laudato Si' Movement in South Africa, said the country was bumping up its reliance on coal for electricity generation "because renewable energy is not ready to supply South Africa efficiently" and sufficiently.

South Africa has nonetheless been making small strides to embrace renewable energy which now accounts for about 13% of the country's total electricity needs, mainly consisting of solar and wind, according to Ember, a global energy think tank.

This means that up to 83% of the country's energy needs are powered by coal while the country also burns diesel fuel for electricity. Moreover, South Africa's emissions per capita of 2.7 tCO2 (carbon dioxide tonnes) are deemed to be "above the global average," according to data from Ember.



People in Soweto, South Africa, walk past electricity pylons July 3, 2022, during frequent power outages because of aging coal-fired plants. (CNS/Reuters/Siphiwe Sibeko)

In 2021, the African country signed a Just Energy Transition Partnership with the United States, European Union, Germany, the United Kingdom and France who committed $8.5 billion in funding for South Africa to shift from coal and to embrace renewable energy alternatives. With South Africa in a diplomatic riff with the U.S. under President Donald Trump, about $1.5 billion of this funding is now under threat after the Trump administration withdrew its share of the funding for South Africa's energy transition.

Kubran said this withdrawal by the U.S. from partly funding South Africa's just energy transition further complicates the country's reliance on coal for electricity. Funding constraints hinder South Africa from embracing renewable energy, as complexities such as the high costs of implementing sustainable options like solar are a prohibitive factor, she said.

For its part, the South African government has a goal to grow the proportion of energy generated from renewables to 33% by 2030.

Kubran said faith-based organizations in South Africa "have been involved in the just energy transition with workshops and meetings" where individuals have advocated for a robust move away from coal and other fossil fuels.



In this undated file photo, Cardinal Stephen Brislin, then-archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, poses for a portrait. (CNS/Courtesy of Archdiocese of Cape Town)

With the coal mining sector sustaining energy and jobs in a country where unemployment is worsening, calls by faith-based organizations for South Africa to move away from coal have not yet yielded a robust switch to renewable energy,

either.

"Our government is highly invested in mining, and because of that passion for them to keep extracting and benefiting economically from the minerals that they're extracting from the ground, unfortunately, the country is not moving toward renewable energy," said Kubran.

Having been warned about the health hazards related to Johannesburg's massive amount of coal burning for electricity, Brislin urged the church in his new archdiocese to embrace the message of *Laudato Si*' espoused by the late Pope Francis.

In his first month as archbishop of Johannesburg, Brislin encouraged the church to plant more trees.

"We are going through a tree planting program at the moment as part of Pope Francis' Laudato Si' in Johannesburg. I consecrated a church in Sharpville and part of that ceremony was a tree planting ceremony," he said.

Brislin said amid the threats of climate change that experts say is being fast-tracked by global warming brought about by carbon emissions, there is renewed hope for environmental and climate change awareness among young people in South Africa.

He added that it was important for African governments to embrace renewable energy through increased consciousness of the pollution, emissions and other related dangers that coal poses to the environment.

South Africa is among the African countries most affected by climate change impacts such as cyclones and flooding alongside Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia. Data from climate modelling studies and scientific research shows that "South Africa will soon be prone to more heatwaves, droughts and heavy rainfall," with these disasters set to "make it impossible to end poverty, unemployment and food insecurity," according to a report by The Conversation.



A climate activist holds a placard as demonstrators in South Africa gather outside the Cape Town International Convention Center Sept. 13, 2023, during the Southern Africa Oil and Gas Conference to call for climate justice resistance against oil and gas corporations and an end to fossil fuels. (OSV News/Reuters/Esa Alexander)

It is not just Catholic leaders that are calling for greater care of the Earth through a just transition to renewable energy in South Africa. Faith leaders and climate activists from across the continent announced their support last year for an international treaty to halt the production and use of fossil fuels, the main cause of climate change, analogous to non-proliferation treaties governing the production of nuclear weapons.

"As people of faith, we have a moral duty to protect God's creation," said Ashley Kitisya, African Programs Manager for Laudato Si' Movement, a global network of Catholics working to ameliorate climate change in the spirit of Francis' encyclical.

Kitisya said the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative provides a tangible way to act on this duty by advocating for the preservation of our environment for future

generations.

Brislin believes that younger people from South Africa and Africa are carrying *Laudato Si*' hopes.

"Great hope for *Laudato Si*' lies with young people as these young people see a greater need for caring for the environment and they are the ones willing to be champions of this cause. As church leaders we need to give them all the support and in South Africa we do see a lot of work still to do in terms of creating awareness for our people about caring for our common home and also to be able to speak truth to power," said Brislin.