

# Coal-free country

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*File photo: coal pollution*

Last Friday, coinciding with Earth Day celebrations worldwide, Britain's National Grid announced to the media it produced 24 hours of electricity without burning coal, the first time Britain's power went coal-free in 135 years.

"First coal-free day in Britain since Industrial Revolution" read the BBC news headline.

Britain's National Grid has gradually been replacing its coal-based electricity plants. The country already went coal-free for several hours during several periods over the past few years. Last May, for instance, solar power in the UK produced more electricity than coal across the whole month, according to research by analysts at Carbon Brief, a UK-based web site covering the latest developments in climate science, climate policy and energy policy.

The British government has pledged to phase out all coal-fired electricity by 2025. Coal accounted for only 23 percent of Britain's electric power in 2015, and was only at 9 percent last year.

But while the coal industry is undergoing what many analysts and investors say is a permanent downsizing not only in Britain, but in many parts of the world, coal demand in Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, is set to triple in the next 25 years.

A recent BusinessMirror special report, "Power struggle: Solar, wind challenge coal as more affordable energy source", said the Philippines has 30 coal-operating contracts in the development and production phase; 48 coal-operating contracts in the exploration phase; and 83 small-scale coal-mining operators as of July 2016.

According to the Department of Energy, coal has the highest contribution to the country's current power-generation mix at almost 45 percent as of 2015. Based on the current installed power-generation capacity of 18,765 megawatts (MW), a 45-percent share translates to \$8.54 billion in coal investments.

It's not an exaggeration to say the coal industry is booming in the Philippines, bucking a global trend and giving gasping coal exporters hope. We seem to be embracing coal while others are walking away from it, even after our country has officially ratified its commitment to the Paris Agreement to reduce carbon emissions by 70 percent in 2030.

The construction of a coal plant anywhere in the Philippines would always face significant environmental and social challenges, more so now that climate-change concerns have become a global focus and other countries are greening their grids. Plans to build more coal plants have already sparked protests and negative media attention from environment activists in various parts of the country.

The government says coal plants are part of a critical energy infrastructure that can provide our fast-developing industries and regions with the much-needed energy security they lack right now. Energy officials also say modern coal plants can be cleaner and safer than most conventional coal plants, as they use new and advanced technology, and that demands to produce 100-percent electricity from renewable energy are impossible.

But there is also clearly something wrong in the picture when a country that has abundant renewable-energy resources still has a strong dependence on coal power plants, even as other countries are shifting to renewable energy in the hope of curbing climate change.

Carbon emissions from coal are the worst, according to a recent Greenpeace study, "Coal: A public health crisis [Diseases and deaths attributed to coal use in the Philippines]".

Deaths due to stroke, heart and other cardiovascular diseases, and respiratory illnesses due to air pollution may go up from the current 960 annual premature deaths to 2,410 deaths per year, with the construction and operation of more coal power plants in the Philippines, the study said.

The study was based on research conducted by Harvard University on the impacts of emissions coming from coal-fired power plants in selected countries in Asia. The Philippine version evaluated 13 operational coal-fired power plants in the Philippines with a combined installed capacity of 3,799.10 MW, as well as the potential impacts of plans to build new coal-fired power plants, which could dramatically increase levels of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and other harmful emissions.

We urge the government to continue exploring the many currently available alternatives to coal power that would allow us to meet our energy needs while reducing emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, including renewable-energy sources, like wind, solar, hydro and biomass.

While the direct price of electricity from the country's coal plants may be low, it doesn't reflect the staggering and lasting costs of coal-related air and water pollution, mining accidents, permanently altered landscapes and climate-change effects.