Indians crowd rivers, shady trees as heat toll passes 1,400

May 28 2015, byOmer Farooq

A young boy dives into a water tank on a hot summer day in New Delhi, India, Wednesday, May 27, 2015. Delhi recorded a maximum temperature of 42 degrees Celsius on Wednesday. In southern India, hundreds of people have died since the middle of April as soaring summer temperatures scorch the country, officials said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

Eating onions, lying in the shade and splashing into rivers, Indians were doing whatever they could Thursday to stay cool during a brutal heat

wave that has killed more than 1,400 in the past month.

Meteorological officials said the heat would likely last several more days—scorching crops, killing wildlife and endangering anyone laboring outdoors.

Officials warned people to stay out of the sun, cover their heads and drink plenty of water, but poverty forces many Indians to work despite the risks.

"Either we have to work, putting our lives under threat, or we go without food," farmer Narasimha said in the badly hit Nalgonda district of southern Andhra Pradesh state. "But we stop work when it becomes unbearable."

In the city of Nizamabad, 150 kilometers (93 miles) north of the state capital of Hyderabad, construction workers were also still on the job.

"If I don't work due to the heat, how will my family survive?" said Mahalakshmi, who earns a daily wage of about $3.10.

Most of the 1,412 heat-related deaths so far have occurred in Andhra Pradesh and neighboring Telangana, where temperatures have soared up to 47 degrees Celsius (117 degrees Fahrenheit), according to government figures.

Among the most vulnerable were the elderly and the poor, many of whom live in slums or farm huts with no access to air conditioners or sometimes even shade-giving trees.

An Indian homeless man sleeps on a pavement in a market area on a hot summer day in New Delhi, India, Wednesday, May 27, 2015. In southern India, hundreds of people have died since the middle of April as soaring summer temperatures scorch the country, officials said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Tsering Topgyal)

Those who were able were heeding the government's advice to avoid the outdoors.

"With so many people dying due to the heat, we are locking the children inside," teacher Satyamurthy said in Khammam, which registered its highest temperature in 67 years on Saturday when the thermometer hit 48 degrees Celsius (more than 118 Fahrenheit).

Cooling monsoon rains were expected to arrive next week in the southern state of Kerala and gradually advance north in coming weeks.

Until then, volunteers were passing out pouches of salted buttermilk or raw onions—both thought to be hydrating. People used handkerchiefs and scarves to block searing winds and stifling air from their faces.

Across the country, teenagers flocked to water basins and rivers to cool off. Many adults took refuge atop woven cots in the shade.

Newspapers devoted full pages to covering the heat wave and its effects, with headlines saying "Homeless bake in tin shelters" and "birds & animals drop dead."

In cities like New Delhi, crowds of office workers gathered around stalls selling fruit drinks and iced water, while police officers wearing sweat-soaked shirts squinted into the sun while directing road traffic.

A laborer pushes his children on a handcart back towards his workplace during a break, past parched fields on a hot summer day in Ghasera, in the outskirts of

New Delhi, India, Wednesday, May 27, 2015. Delhi recorded a maximum temperature of 42 degrees Celsius on Wednesday. In southern India, hundreds of people have died since the middle of April as soaring summer temperatures scorch the country, officials said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

At the zoo, leopards and tigers lay panting in the shade until zoo keepers came by every two hours with hoses. One white tiger rolled around in obvious delight while being sprayed with water. Elephants drank thirstily and lolled in a pond.

In the northern Indian states of Punjab and Haryana, Sikhs distributed free glasses of rose-scented milk to the public.

Forecasting service AccuWeather described this as the most intense heat wave in India in recent years. The death toll for Andhra Pradesh alone, at 1,360, was higher than during a 2003 heat wave when 1,300 died in what was then a unified state including both Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

Doctors were on alert for heat-related illness like sun stroke, and were telling people venturing outdoors to cover their heads and wear light, loose clothing, said health officer Sarojini in the city of Vishakapatnam who goes by one name, as is common in the region.

A young boy, son of a laborer, walks to a water pump to fill his bottle with drinking water on a hot summer day in Ghasera, on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, Wednesday, May 27, 2015. Delhi recorded a maximum temperature of 42 degrees Celsius on Wednesday. In southern India, hundreds of people have died since the middle of April as soaring summer temperatures scorch the country, officials said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

Telangana's school board postponed the start date for colleges for a week from Monday. The state also opened centers where cold water was being served, and changed the working hours for rural employment schemes, disaster management official Sada Bhargavi said.

One Hyderabad man was doing his newspaper delivery route at dawn to avoid peak temperatures. "It is difficult to do this work in this harsh weather, but I have a family to take care of," said Rajaiah, who goes by one name.

Otherwise, Hyderabad's normally jam-packed streets were almost deserted Thursday, as market vendors and office workers avoided going out.

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