

# Anger, fear at Delhi's pollution ground zero

December 20 2015, by Trudy Harris

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For 12 hours a day, Raju Misra stands at his snack stall in the world's ultimate pollution blackspot, inhaling toxic fumes and railing against India's politicians for failing to clean up the filthy air.

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the most hazardous on the planet.

But life is measurably more dangerous for Misra and the myriad of other street vendors and rickshaw drivers who scratch a living at ground zero—a bus terminus in the city's bustling Anand Vihar suburb.

Surrounded by major roads clogged with old trucks, along with the interstate bus station, dust-generating construction and not far from a coal-fired power station, the area's air routinely tests far worse than the rest of Delhi.

"In the morning, you can see the smog and smoke in the air from the pollution," Misra said, struggling to be heard over the buses.

"We want the number of cars on the road to be cut. Common people, politicians have to come together to reduce Delhi's pollution," the 60-year-old said from behind his counter.

Delhi has been shrouded in a toxic soup in recent weeks as winter sets in, cutting visibility and pushing PM 2.5 levels more than 10 times over the WHO's recommended safe limit.

These fine particles less than 2.5 micrometres in diameter are linked to higher rates of chronic bronchitis, lung cancer and heart disease as they settle into the lungs and can pass into the bloodstream.

Expert Anumita Roychowdhury said the elderly and children are most vulnerable, particularly those from poor families who live in areas of Delhi highly exposed to the particles.

## **Irreversible lung damage**



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"Children take in more air than the rest of us. And studies show the damage to their lungs can be irreversible," Roychowdhury, from the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) think-tank, told AFP.

In the narrow, dark alleys near the bus station where simple homes are clustered, Janki Devi's three children stay indoors after school rather than run around outside.

"I don't send my children to the park to play. I don't want them to fall ill and get fever or cough because of the dust," said the 28-year-old, who has lived in Anand Vihar for 15 years.

Devi, whose husband earns 8,000 rupees (\$120) a month toiling in a factory, said she works hard to keep her small home dust-free, but feels powerless once they step outside the front door in the poor neighbourhood.

India's courts are pushing governments to act over the mounting crisis, last week ordering a moratorium in the city on large diesel luxury cars whose fumes are partly blamed for the pollution.

"Why should a rich man be travelling in a diesel car and pollute the environment?" Chief Justice T.S. Thakur told the court, which also banned the burning of garbage.

The court also barred the thousands of diesel trucks that storm through Delhi every night to avoid tolls on roads around the city en route to the rest of the country.

Politicians are belatedly jumping on board, with the Delhi government announcing this month cars will only be allowed on its congested roads on alternate days in January.



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There are already more than 8.5 million vehicles on Delhi's roads with 1,400 new cars being added every day as incomes rise.

Experts remain sceptical about how the plan will be enforced given that the police answer to the national government, which shares an acrid relationship with its Delhi counterpart.

But federal Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar, fresh from the Paris climate change summit, insisted last week there will be "no fighting" in efforts to clean up the city for all residents.

"This is the principle we are following to achieve a pollution-free Delhi,

and we have started working towards this goal," Javadekar told reporters, adding that work on long-awaited bypasses for the trucks has finally started.



Indian school children present a symbolic globe to the Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Prakash Javadekar, during a ceremony in New Delhi, on November 27, 2015

CSE director general Sunita Narain said politicians are under pressure from the courts as well as mounting alarm and criticism of the crisis among broad sections of Delhi society.

"I don't think it's just the middle class or the people who can afford to run away from Delhi (who are concerned). People who can run away from Delhi are running away and putting air purifiers in their homes."

"I think there is a deep worry in Delhi today."

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Citation: Anger, fear at Delhi's pollution ground zero (2015, December 20) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-12-anger-delhi-pollution-ground.html>

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