

India's smog-choked capital ends car ban trial

January 14 2016, by Annie Banerji



A 15-day experiment in New Delhi, which started January 1, allowed private cars on the roads only on every alternate day and slapped violators with a hefty fine of 2,000 rupees (\$30) in a bid to reduce air pollution

New Delhi wrapped up Friday a controversial trial of driving restrictions that took about a million cars off its roads, with arguments still raging about whether it is the right approach to cutting smog in the world's most polluted capital.

The 15-day experiment, which started January 1, allowed private cars on the roads only on every alternate day and slapped violators with a hefty fine of 2,000 rupees (\$30) in a bid to reduce air pollution.

It took more than a third of the city's nearly three million private cars off the roads, visibly lessening the traffic on usually clogged routes.

In a city where road rules are routinely flouted, most drivers appeared to be obeying the restrictions and many said they viewed the scheme positively.

"Commuting wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be," said marketing executive Akshath Matharu, who has been taking the metro to work every other day.

"Look at the roads, they're so thinly populated. Who could have imagined free-flowing traffic in Delhi?" the 32-year-old said.

A 2014 World Health Organization survey of more than 1,600 cities ranked Delhi as the most polluted, partly because of the 8.5 million vehicles on its roads, with 1,400 more added every day.

The dramatic curbs were announced by Delhi's firebrand Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in December as part of a wider anti-pollution drive that also includes shutting some [coal-fired power plants](#) and vacuuming [roads](#) to reduce dust.



An Indian pedestrian walks with his face covered by a protective mask in New Delhi on December 31, 2015, the day before an experimental restriction was put into place to limit the number of cars on the roads in order to combat pollution

The Delhi government said the trial resulted in a "more than 50 percent drop in [air pollution](#) primarily caused by vehicular traffic" and that the measures could be enforced in a second phase after a review meeting on Monday.

But India's state-run System of Air Quality Weather Forecasting and Research showed levels of harmful PM 2.5 particles hovering between "very poor" and "severe" between January 1 and 15 and well above the WHO safe limit of 25.

Environmentalists attributed the persistent smog to low winds and a fall in daytime temperatures.

'People are dying'

A number of challengers approached courts during the trial ban arguing it was inconveniencing residents and saying the city's public transport system was not up to the task.

But India's Supreme Court, whose top judge backed the car-rationing plan at the outset, disagreed with petitioners.

"People are dying due to pollution and you are challenging it for publicity," a bench of justices AK Sikri and R Banumathi said Thursday.

The top court's judges added that they had been car-pooling to improve the city's filthy air, which claims up to 30,000 lives each year, according to the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment.

The auto industry, however, argued cars have been unfairly targeted when polluting industries were mainly to blame.

"Let me dispel the myth that cars are the biggest polluters. Of the total (pollution) only three percent comes from cars, the rest is heavy duty industry and other vehicles and so on," Vinod Dasari, president of the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers said Thursday.

A report by India's top technology institute also found that fly-ash from coal-based tandoor ovens, burning of solid waste and road dust were among the main culprits.

Delhi's air usually worsens in winter as cooler air traps pollutants and people light fires to stay warm.

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