

Smog chokes Chinese cities, grounding flights, closing roads

December 20 2016, by Nomaan Merchant And Wayne Zhang



People ride bicycles and electric bikes crossing a road in Beijing as the capital of China is shrouded by heavy smog on Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, choking China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, choking China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some

highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution.

Beijing and much of industrial northern China are in the midst of a "red alert," the highest level in China's four-tiered pollution warning system. The alert has affected 460 million people, according to Greenpeace East Asia, which calculated that about 200 million people were living in areas that had experienced levels of air pollution more than 10 times above the guideline set by the World Health Organization.

Members of the public closely watch levels of PM2.5, particles measuring 2.5 microns across that are easily inhaled and damage lung tissue. The World Health Organization designates the safe level for the tiny, poisonous particles at 25 micrograms per cubic meter. On Tuesday morning, the PM2.5 reading in Beijing climbed above 300. In many northern Chinese cities, the reading has exceeded 500 micrograms per cubic meter.

State media reported that 169 flights have been canceled at Beijing Capital International Airport, where visibility fell at one point to 300 meters (984 feet). Sections of Beijing's sixth ring road, the outermost highway encircling the city of more than 20 million people, were shut down in a bid to keep cars off the roads.



A woman uses a scarf to cover her for protection against air pollution walks on street in Beijing as the capital of China is shrouded by heavy smog on Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, choking China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

Authorities have even removed charcoal grills from restaurants and banned spray painting in parts of the city, state media reported.

Adding to a sense of crisis, local news in recent days reported that hospitals were encountering a boom in cases of children with respiratory problems and preparing teams of doctors to handle the surge of pollution-related cases. Photos showed waiting rooms crowded with parents carrying youngsters wearing face masks.

Outside the Capital Pediatrics Institute on Tuesday, parents voiced

frustration about the toxic air for throat infections and the flu.



Vehicles drive past China's state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) headquarters and construction buildings at the Central Business District shrouded by heavy smog in Beijing, Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, choking China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

"He is coughing and breathing short, and always feeling sputum in his throat," said Du Renxin, an IT worker, who was with his 2-year-old, who has had to make monthly visits to the doctor.

China has long faced some of the worst air pollution in the world, blamed on its reliance of coal for energy and factory production, as well as a surplus of older, less efficient cars on its roads. Beijing and other

cities have tried to improve air quality by switching power plants from coal to natural gas and rolling out fleets of electric buses and taxis.

But despite its public commitment to reduce carbon emissions, China remains the world's largest producer and consumer of coal, with plans to build new factories and increase production. Government officials, facing rising energy prices earlier this year, lifted caps on production days for many mines.



A man places his hand over his mouth as he walks past graffiti of a dragon on a street in Beijing, China, Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, choking China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

Since the red alert went into effect, more than 700 companies stopped

production in Beijing and traffic police were restricting drivers by monitoring their license plate numbers. Dozens of cities closed schools and took other emergency measures.

"The smog has serious repercussions on the lungs and the respiratory system, and it also influences the health of future generations, so under a red alert, it is safer to stay at home rather than go to school," Li Jingren, a 15-year-old high school student in Beijing, said Monday.

In nearby Tianjin, authorities canceled 350 flights and closed all highways in the municipality. Public transportation services were increased as restrictions on cars were imposed.



China's state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) headquarters and construction buildings at the Central Business District are shrouded by heavy smog in Beijing, Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, choking China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air

pollution. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

Authorities in the northern province of Hebei, which surrounds Beijing, ordered coal and cement plants to temporarily shut down or reduce production.

The alert is expected to end Wednesday.



A Chinese national flag flutters against buildings in Beijing as the capital of China is shrouded by heavy smog on Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, choking China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



A woman wearing a mask for protection against air pollution walks across a road in Beijing as the capital of China is shrouded by heavy smog on Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, choking China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



A man wearing a mask for protection against air pollution walks across a road in Beijing as the capital of China is shrouded by heavy smog on Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, clouding China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



A woman wearing a mask for protection against air pollution walks on a pedestrian overhead bridge in Beijing as the capital of China is shrouded by heavy smog on Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, clouding China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



A construction site wall depicting the skyline of Beijing stands as the capital of China is shrouded by heavy smog on Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, clouding China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



A man on crutches wears a mask as he walks past graffiti of a dragon on a street in Beijing, China, Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Thick, gray smog fell over Beijing on Tuesday, choking China's capital in a haze that spurred authorities to cancel flights and close some highways in emergency measures to cut down on air pollution.(AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

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