Anger rises as toxic air chokes India's capital

November 11 2017, by Nick Perry

Indian commuters wait for transport amid thick blanket of smog on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, Friday, Nov. 10, 2017. As air pollution peaked this week in Delhi, it rose to more than 30 times the World Health Organization's recommended safe level. Experts have compared it to smoking a couple of packs of cigarettes a day. A recent report by the Lancet medical journal estimated that a quarter of all premature deaths in India, some 2.5 million each year, are caused by pollution. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

As thick smog crept over India's capital this past week and smudged landmarks from view, Nikunj Pandey could feel his eyes and throat burning.

Pandey stopped doing his regular workouts and said he felt tightness in his lungs. He started wearing a triple layer of pollution masks over his mouth. And he became angry that he couldn't safely breathe the air.

"This is a basic right," he said. "A basic right of humanity."

Pandey is among many people in New Delhi who have become more aware of the toxic air in recent years and are increasingly frustrated at the lack of meaningful action by authorities.

This past week the air was the worst it's been all year in the capital, with microscopic particles that can affect breathing and health spiking to 75 times the level considered safe by the World Health Organization.

Experts have compared breathing the air to smoking a couple of packs of cigarettes a day. The Lancet medical journal recently estimated that some 2.5 million Indians die each year from pollution.

United Airlines suspended its flights between New Delhi and Newark, New Jersey, for Saturday and Sunday because of the heavy air pollution in the Indian capital, said Sonia, an airline official who uses one name.

Indian workers use brooms to sweep away dust in the morning fog in Greater Noida, near New Delhi, India, Friday, Nov.10, 2017. A thick gray haze has enveloped India's capital region as air pollution hit hazardous levels. As winter approaches, a thick, soupy smog routinely envelops most parts of northern India, caused by dust, the burning of crops, emissions from factories and the burning of coal and piles of garbage as the poor try to keep warm. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)

Pandey said the millions of rural folk who have moved to the city understand the problem better than they once did, and are trying everything from tying scarves over their faces to eating "jaggery," a sugar cane product that some people believe offers a range of health benefits.

Masks once considered an affectation of hypochondriac tourists are these days routinely worn by government workers and regular people on the street.

Volunteers handed out thousands of green surgical masks this week to make a point about the pollution, but such masks likely have a limited impact on keeping out the tiny particles from people's lungs.

"This is truly a health emergency," said Anumita Roychowdhury, the executive director of research and advocacy at New Delhi's Centre for Science and Environment.

She said doctors in recent days have been dealing with a 20 percent spike in emergency hospital admissions from people suffering heart and lung problems. And that's in a city, she said, where one in every three children already has compromised lungs.

Sparrow birds roosting on cables are silhouetted against an under construction building in the morning fog in Greater Noida, near New Delhi, India, Friday, Nov.10, 2017. A thick gray haze has enveloped India's capital region as air pollution hit hazardous levels. As winter approaches, a thick, soupy smog routinely envelops most parts of northern India, caused by dust, the burning of crops, emissions from factories and the burning of coal and piles of garbage as

the poor try to keep warm. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)

Seema Upadhyaya, who heads a primary school, said she has never before witnessed so many children suffering from respiratory illnesses as she has this year. That has prompted changes to the curriculum.

"It's impacting everybody," she said.

Authorities have been taking extraordinary measures to try to mitigate the immediate crisis. They have temporarily closed schools and stopped most trucks from entering the city. Next week they are considering rationing car usage.

But everyone agrees such measures don't address the root causes, which remain hard to solve.

Roychowdhury said the city's pollution has been trapped this week by a lack of wind at ground level, colliding winds in the upper atmosphere, and cooling temperatures.

The morning sun is enveloped by a blanket of smog on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, Friday, Nov. 10, 2017. A thick gray haze has enveloped India's capital region as air pollution hit hazardous levels. As winter approaches, a thick, soupy smog routinely envelops most parts of northern India, caused by dust, the burning of crops, emissions from factories and the burning of coal and piles of garbage as the poor try to keep warm. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

Air quality typically gets worse at this time of year as nearby farmers burn fields and people build street fires to keep warm. The conditions this week prompted the capital's top elected official, Arvind Kejriwal, to describe his city as a "gas chamber."

While crop burning has been banned in and around the capital, officials say it's hard to punish impoverished farmers for continuing traditional methods that have been handed down through the generations.

Pandey said it's part of a broader problem in India.

"Your water is not healthy, your food is not healthy, your vegetables are polluted, they are poisoned," he said. "I mean, everything is polluted right now."

Roychowdhury said she is encouraged there is rising awareness of the air quality problem, both among residents and the medical community. But she says authorities need to do more.

In this Friday, Nov. 10, 2017 photo, Raisina hills, the government's seat of power, is seen enveloped in a thick blanket of smog in New Delhi, India. As air pollution peaked this week in Delhi, it rose to more than 30 times the World Health Organization's recommended safe level. Experts have compared it to smoking a couple of packs of cigarettes a day. A recent report by the Lancet medical journal estimated that a quarter of all premature deaths in India, some 2.5 million each year, are caused by pollution. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

She said officials have been asking people this week to use more public transport, but at the same time the city doesn't have enough buses and

hasn't bought any new ones in recent years.

"What we are saying, and the Supreme Court has already asked for it, is that there should be a comprehensive plan for all sources of pollution," she said.

Meanwhile, people like Pandey say they are going to have to suffer through, because New Delhi is where they need to be based for work opportunities and their families.

"We are India, right?" he said. "We just try to survive in whatever condition we are in. That is how it is."

In this Nov. 9, 2017 photo, an Indian boy uses a handkerchief to protect his face as school children and parents await transport surrounded by morning smog on the outskirts of New Delhi, India. This week the air was the worst it's been all year in the capital, with microscopic particles that can affect breathing and

health spiking, at times, to 75 times the level considered safe by the World Health Organization. Authorities have temporarily closed schools and stopped most trucks from entering the city. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)

In this Nov. 8, 2017 photo, two men pedal their bicycles past cows enveloped in the morning smog on the outskirts of New Delhi, India. Thick smog has constricted India's capital this week, smudging landmarks from view and angering residents. Many are frustrated at the lack of meaningful action by authorities. The air was the worst it has been all year in New Delhi, with microscopic particles that can affect breathing and health spiking, at times, to 75 times the level considered safe by the World Health Organization. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)

In this Nov. 9, 2017 photo, two men walk past a cow surrounded by morning smog on the outskirts of New Delhi, India. Thick smog has constricted India's capital this week, smudging landmarks from view and angering residents. Many are frustrated at the lack of meaningful action by authorities. The air was the worst it has been all year in New Delhi, with microscopic particles that can affect breathing and health spiking, at times, to 75 times the level considered safe by the World Health Organization. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)

Indian motorists ride past a thick blanket of smog and dust on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, Friday, Nov. 10, 2017. Thick smog has constricted India's capital this week, smudging landmarks from view and angering residents. Many are frustrated at the lack of meaningful action by authorities. The air was the worst it has been all year in New Delhi, with microscopic particles that can affect breathing and health spiking, at times, to 75 times the level considered safe by the World Health Organization. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

In this Friday, Nov. 10, 2017 photo, an Indian man is silhouetted against the headlights of incoming traffic as he walks surrounded by a thick blanket of smog and dust on the outskirts of New Delhi, India. This week the air was the worst it's been all year in the capital, with microscopic particles that can affect breathing and health spiking, at times, to 75 times the level considered safe by the World Health Organization. The Lancet medical journal recently estimated some 2.5 million Indians die each year from pollution. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

In this Thursday, Nov. 9, 2017 file photo, a girl begs for alms from a group of people wearing face masks to fight the pollution in New Delhi, India. A thick gray haze has enveloped India's capital as air pollution hit hazardous levels, prompting local officials to shut down schools. According to a recent report by the Lancet medical journal on the impact of pollution across the world, one out of every four premature deaths in India in 2015, or some 2.5 million, was attributed to pollution. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup, File)

In this Friday, Nov. 10, 2017 file photo, the morning sun is enveloped by a blanket of smog on the outskirts of New Delhi, India. A thick gray haze has enveloped India's capital region as air pollution hit hazardous levels. As winter approaches, a thick, soupy smog routinely envelops most parts of northern India, caused by dust, the burning of crops, emissions from factories and the burning of coal and piles of garbage as the poor try to keep warm. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri, File)

In this Thursday, Nov. 9, 2017, photo, Nikunj Pandey, left, sits with his friends wearing pollution mask in New Delhi, India. As air pollution peaked this week in Delhi, it rose to more than 30 times the World Health Organization's recommended safe level. Experts have compared it to smoking a couple of packs of cigarettes a day. A recent report by the Lancet medical journal estimated that a quarter of all premature deaths in India, some 2.5 million each year, are caused by pollution. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

An Indian boy walks past burning garbage as the morning sun is enveloped by a blanket of smog on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, Friday, Nov. 10, 2017. As air pollution peaked this week in Delhi, it rose to more than 30 times the World Health Organization's recommended safe level. Experts have compared it to smoking a couple of packs of cigarettes a day. A recent report by the Lancet medical journal estimated that a quarter of all premature deaths in India, some 2.5 million each year, are caused by pollution. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

An Indian man and a child emerges from a thick blanket of smog to drop off a child at school on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, Friday, Nov. 10, 2017. As air pollution peaked this week in Delhi, it rose to more than 30 times the World Health Organization's recommended safe level. Experts have compared it to smoking a couple of packs of cigarettes a day. A recent report by the Lancet medical journal estimated that a quarter of all premature deaths in India, some 2.5 million each year, are caused by pollution. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

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