Air quality sinks to 'severe' in haze-shrouded New Delhi

November 12 2019, by Rishab R. Jain

A sweet candy vendor walks amidst thick layer of smog as he looks for customers in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2019. A thick haze of polluted air is hanging over India's capital, with authorities trying to tackle the problem by sprinkling water to settle dust and banning some construction. The air quality index exceeded 400, about eight times the recommended maximum. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

A thick gray haze blanketed India's capital on Tuesday, with authorities attempting to reduce the pollution by sprinkling water to settle dust and banning some construction.

The air quality index exceeded 400, considered "severe" and about eight times the recommended maximum, according to the state-run Central Pollution Control Board.

Buildings and monuments in New Delhi were largely obscured by the haze and residents complained of health effects.

"We can't breathe properly. My eyes are burning," said Urmila Devi, who lives in Ghaziabad, one of the capital's most polluted areas.

Favorable winds had briefly halved the level of pollutants, but winds blowing from the northwest carried air-borne particles from burning crops in Punjab and Haryana states to New Delhi, leading again to high levels of pollution, according to the government's air quality monitoring system, SAFAR.

Air pollution in northern India peaks in the winter due to smoke from agricultural fires. Farmers say they are unfairly criticized and have no choice but to burn stubble to prepare their fields for the next crop.

The smoke from fields mixes with vehicle emissions and construction dust, making New Delhi the world's most-polluted capital.

Tourists wear masks to save themselves from pollution as they cross a road in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2019. A thick haze of polluted air is hanging over India's capital, with authorities trying to tackle the problem by sprinkling water to settle dust and banning some construction. The air quality index exceeded 400, about eight times the recommended maximum. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

Rising pollution levels have also irked foreign visitors, with some saying they plan to cut short their trips because of health concerns.

"We are in the capital of India. The government should put more effort into tackling this problem," said Rijil Odamvalappil of Abu Dhabi, who was visiting New Delhi with his wife.

Some residents say the pollution is so bad that it should be the most important issue for the government.

Pollution controls have been imposed, such as sprinkling water from high-rises and banning some construction to settle or avoid dust, but the capital's poor air quality has continued amid calls for the government to do more to address the root causes.

Restrictions on private vehicles meant to reduce emissions were relaxed on Monday and Tuesday for the 550th anniversary of the birth of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion.

Birds sit on street lights as city enveloped under thick smog in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2019. A thick haze of polluted air is hanging over India's capital, with authorities trying to tackle the problem by sprinkling water to settle

dust and banning some construction. The air quality index exceeded 400, about eight times the recommended maximum. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

Tourists wear mask to save themselves from pollution as they cross a road amidst thick layer of smog in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2019. A thick haze of polluted air is hanging over India's capital, with authorities trying to tackle the problem by sprinkling water to settle dust and banning some construction. The air quality index exceeded 400, about eight times the recommended maximum. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

Foreign tourists wear masks to save themselves from pollution as they cross a road in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2019. A thick haze of polluted air is hanging over India's capital, with authorities trying to tackle the problem by sprinkling water to settle dust and banning some construction. The air quality index exceeded 400, about eight times the recommended maximum. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

Civic workers sprinkle water to clear the dust on tress as the city is enveloped under thick smog in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2019. A thick haze of polluted air is hanging over India's capital, with authorities trying to tackle the problem by sprinkling water to settle dust and banning some construction. The air quality index exceeded 400, about eight times the recommended maximum. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

Doctors in the city of 20 million people say many of their patients are complaining of ailments related to the filthy air they breathe.

New Delhi's chief minister, Arvind Kejriwal, has made fervent appeals on Twitter and in newspaper advertisements for residents to help tackle the pollution problem.

India's top court last week asked the city government, its neighboring states and the federal [government](#) to work together to improve air quality.

World Health Organization data released last year showed India had 10 of the world's 20 most polluted cities.

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