

Masks are back, construction banned and schools shut as toxic air engulfs New Delhi

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A cyclist rides amid smog in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 7, 2023. Masks are back on the streets as residents of the capital city grapple with the annual surge in air pollution that has engulfed the region. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

A toxic blanket of grey smog hangs over New Delhi's monuments and

high-rises. Schools have been ordered shut and construction banned. People are back to wearing masks.

In the Indian capital, it is that time of the year again. Authorities are struggling to rein in severe air pollution levels, an annual and chronic health crisis that disrupts the lives of over 20 million in the city every year.

On Tuesday, the [air quality index](#) veered close to the 400 mark for tiny particulate matter, a level considered hazardous and more than 10 times the global safety threshold, according to SAFAR, India's main environmental monitoring agency. It's the fifth consecutive day of bad air in the region.

"There's too much smog. I'm watching the air quality index and I'm scared about this climate," said Srinivas Rao, a visitor from Andhra Pradesh state who donned a mask as he took a morning walk near the city's India Gate monument.

Authorities have deployed water sprinklers and anti-smog guns to control the haze and announced a fine of 20,000 rupees (\$240) for drivers found using gasoline and diesel cars, buses and trucks that create smog. Meanwhile, doctors have advised residents to wear masks and avoid outdoors as much as possible because the smog could trigger respiratory infections, flu and asthma attacks.



People jog on an under construction flyover amid smog in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 7, 2023. Masks are back on the streets as residents of the capital city grapple with the annual surge in air pollution that has engulfed the region. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

The pollution also threatens to disrupt the ongoing Cricket World Cup, hosted by India, after the Sri Lankan team had to cancel their [training session](#) in New Delhi over the weekend, before they faced Bangladesh on Monday at the Arun Jaitley Stadium.

Demand for air purifiers has risen in the past week, local media reported.

Residents like Renu Aggarwal, 55, are worried the smog will worsen as

Diwali, the Hindu festival of light that features the lighting of firecrackers, approaches this weekend. Her daughter has a pollen allergy that worsens with pollution.

"She cannot breathe. Even though we keep the doors and windows shut in our home, the pollution still affects her so much that even going to the washroom is difficult for her. And she gets breathless," she said.

New Delhi tops the list almost every year of many Indian cities with [poor air quality](#), particularly in the winter, when the burning of crop residues in neighboring states coincides with [cooler temperatures](#) that trap hazardous smoke.



A motorcyclist drives wearing pollution mask amid smog in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 7, 2023. Masks are back on the streets as residents of the capital

city grapple with the annual surge in air pollution that has engulfed the region.
Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



Motorcyclists drive wearing pollution masks amid smog in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, Nov. 7, 2023. Masks are back on the streets as residents of the capital city grapple with the annual surge in air pollution that has engulfed the region.
Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

The burning of crop remnants at the start of the winter wheat-sowing season is a key contributor to the pollution in north India. Authorities have been trying to discourage farmers by offering cash incentives to buy machines to do the job. But smoke from crop burning still accounts

for 25% of the pollution in New Delhi, according to the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology in Pune.

New Delhi saw a sharp 32% rise in tiny particles in the air between 2019 and 2020, a dip of 43.7 % in 2021, and a steady increase in 2022 and 2023, according to Respirer Living Sciences, an organization that monitors air quality and other environmental factors.

The severe air [pollution](#) crisis affects every resident in the city, but the millions who work outdoors are even more vulnerable.

Gulshan Kumar, who drives an auto rickshaw, said his nose, throat and eyes regularly fill up with dirt in the air.

His children plead with him to return to his hometown in Bihar state. "They ask me why I work in this polluted and diseased city," he said. "If I had had employment back home, I wouldn't have come to Delhi to work."

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