

Residents of India's capital suffer serious health hazards due to air pollution

By Deepal Jayasekera
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People living in New Delhi, India's capital, face serious health dangers as thick smog creeps over the city. The city's air is full of microscopic particles that can affect breathing, harm lungs and other organs and cause cancer and asthma. The concentration of toxic particles is 75 times the level considered safe by the World Health Organisation.

New Delhi's air quality index has been in the range of 700 to 1,000. Any reading over 300 is hazardous, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency. The pollution level is so high that experts have compared breathing the air to smoking 45 cigarettes a day.

In comments to the media last weekend, Anumita Roychowdhury, the executive director of research and advocacy at New Delhi's Centre for Science and Environment, described the situation as "truly a health emergency." She said doctors in the city have experienced a 20 percent hike in emergency hospital admissions due to heart and lung problems in recent days.

Anupam Sibal, group medical director and senior paediatrician at Apollo Hospital said: "We've seen around a 30 to 35 percent increase of patients in the past couple of days.. . It wasn't like this five years ago. Children with respiratory problems are finding their issues are exacerbated. It affects everyone."

Seema Upadhyaya, a primary school principal, told reporters she had never before witnessed so many children suffering from respiratory illnesses.

Working people and the poor in the city are the most affected. Wealthy and upper middle class residents can afford expensive air purifiers in their homes. But the vast majority of poor city dwellers must depend on various types of masks which are not adequate in filtering out tiny particles.

J.C. Suri, a pulmonary disease specialist at Safdarjung hospital, said: "Those on the streets are the most vulnerable, as they are not very healthy to begin with. They are exposed to construction dust, vehicle exhaust on a daily basis, and at this time of year, it gets worse."

Shyami Sodhi, a Delhi resident told Sky News last Saturday: "Over the last five days the haze, smog and smoke has spread all over. It comes inside the house, even if you close your windows. It's difficult to breathe."

United Airlines was forced to suspend its flights between New Delhi and Newark, New Jersey last weekend as thick haze dangerously obscured pilots' vision.

The primary causes for the air pollution are dust from construction work, vehicle emissions and burning of crop waste by farmers in the neighbouring states of Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.

Governments at central and city levels have failed to take adequate measures to protect residents. They have resorted to ad-hoc moves, such as closing down city schools for the week last Tuesday, banning construction in the region until yesterday and limiting truck and car travel in the city.

Roychowdhury from the Centre for Science and Environment praised the rising awareness of the problem among residents and the medical community but said the authorities needed to do more. Commenting on city officials' advice for people to use more public transport to reduce vehicle emissions, she pointed out that the city lacks enough buses and has not bought any new ones in recent years.

Authorities blame the burning of paddy straw by farmers in nearby states, accusing them of defying a ban enacted by the Haryana and Punjab state

governments in 2013 in response to a National Green Tribunal ruling. But farmers complain that they have not been given a viable alternative. They burn paddy straw after harvesting in the fall so they can plant wheat as a winter crop. Farmers demand that the central government subsidise a shift to more expensive alternatives like converting straw into useful resources as bio pellets.

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, the Aam Admi Party (AAP) leader, attempted to cover up his government's responsibility and pit working people in Delhi against farmers. He tweeted: "Delhi has become a gas chamber. Every year this happens during this part of year. We have to find a [solution] to crop burning in adjoining states."

The deadly impact of pollution is not limited to New Delhi but affect India as a whole. According to a recent estimate published by the *Lancet* medical journal, some 2.5 million Indians die each year from the effects of pollution.

The toxic air problem in New Delhi, in particular, and the pollution death toll in general, is bound up with the system of capitalist production driven by private profit. Governments at central, state and city levels are fully committed to defending the mercenary interests of local and foreign capital and turn a blind eye as investors' industries violate basic environmental protection requirements.

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