

# *Air Quality in India's Capital Is Dreadfully Bad. Again.*

Toxic air in New Delhi and large parts of northern India this week has prompted school closures, traffic restrictions and political infighting.



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Nov. 4, 2022 Updated 10:34 a.m. ET

NEW DELHI — This year's air pollution season in northern India is off to a dreadful start, even by the standards of a region with some of the world's worst air.

Particulate matter hovering over New Delhi, the capital, and nearby areas in recent days has turned the sky a muted gray and led to widespread suffering, school closings and other disruptions. Politicians are trading bitter accusations over who is to blame.

“We are not breathing air but smoking it,” said Jyoti Pande Lavakare, an environmental activist in New Delhi and the author of “Breathing Here Is Injurious to Your Health,” a book about air pollution in the country.

Public attention has focused on the pollution in New Delhi this week, she added, but hundreds of millions of people in northern India are also suffering from some of the worst air pollution they have seen in years.

India's air quality, never great to begin with, tends to worsen in the autumn, when farmers burn straw left over from their rice harvests to make room for new planting. The pattern was no different this fall, but the latest air quality readings have been especially dire.

As of Friday afternoon, 16 cities across India had “very poor” air, according to government data that tracked air quality numbers far above what the World Health Organization would consider healthy. The air in 14 other cities was “severe,” the worst on the country’s six-tier air quality scale.

A view of New Delhi enveloped by smog on Friday. Shonal Ganguly/Associated Press



A farmer burning straw after a rice harvest on the outskirts of Jalandhar, in Punjab, on Thursday. The practice contributes to India's air pollution, but efforts to discourage it have fallen short. Shammi Mehra/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

This week, the Delhi government asked residents to work from home or car pool. Truck traffic into the city was halted, and several school districts in the area moved classes online.

On Friday, Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi, directed primary schools to close as of the end of Friday, and told schools to stop outdoor activities for older children. The country's top human rights commission also summoned officials from Delhi and adjoining states for a meeting on crop burning.

India's latest air pollution crisis already has a sharp political edge, perhaps because some politicians are beginning to look ahead to the country's 2024 general election.

On Wednesday, Mr. Kejriwal, Delhi's chief minister, suggested that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government should not blame only Delhi for the pollution, because it was widespread across northern India.

"This is not the time for blame game and politics, but time to find a solution to the problem," he said.

The environment minister, Bhupender Yadav, fired back by saying that Mr. Kejriwal's political party, a rival to Mr. Modi's, was to blame for allowing crop burning to escalate in the neighboring state of Punjab, where it holds power.

"There is no doubt over who has turned Delhi into a gas chamber," Mr. Yadav wrote on Twitter.



Only a few people risked outdoor exercise in New Delhi on Thursday. Rajat Gupta/EPA, via Shutterstock

Traffic was light under gray skies. Vipin Kumar/Hindustan Times, via Getty Images

Air pollution is typically caused by tiny particulate matter produced by burning coal, gasoline, wood, chemicals and other materials. The particulate matter penetrates the lungs and the bloodstream, worsening asthma and other lung disorders. It can also increase the risk of stroke, heart attack and other complications.

An estimated 4.2 million deaths worldwide in 2015 were attributable to long-term exposure to outdoor particulate pollution, according to a study in *The Lancet*, a medical journal. East Asia and South Asia accounted for an estimated 59 percent of the deaths, the authors wrote.

In 2019, air pollution killed more Indians than any other risk factor, according to government data. But the burden from India's bad air is not shared equally, in part because children from poor families spend more of their lives outdoors.

In India, governments on the federal and regional levels have been trying to fight air pollution by providing equipment to farmers that helps them dispose of crop residue without burning it — for example, by composting, in a process that takes a few weeks. Or, by encouraging them to change what they grow.

But those programs are still in their infancy and will require more resources, along with farmers' participation, said Sachchida Nand Tripathi, a professor of atmospheric sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur.

“If you want to get rid of it,” he said of northern India's air pollution, “we need to talk to farmers' leaders and tell them to move to other crops.”

Sameer Yasir reported from New Delhi and Mike Ives from Seoul.