

New delhi climate change

After an unexpected respite as coronavirus lockdowns stalled economic activity, air pollution has returned to pre-COVID-19 levels in Delhi, the world's most air polluted capital city (Figure 1).

Last month, ahead of the usual spike in winter, the Delhi administration launched an antipollution campaign. But to win, nothing short of sustained action on multiple fronts will suffice. Other Asian capitals too have faced pollution crises. But Delhi's is extreme because of a combination of smoke from thermal plants and brick kilns in the capital region, effluents from a congested transportation network, stubble or biomass burning by farmers in neighboring states, and the lack of cleansing winds that causes air pollution to hang over the city. Even as technical solutions are within reach, the campaign must overcome the poor policy coordination among central, city, and local governments.

Delhi's toxic haze is a deadly health risk to its residents, particularly children, the elderly, and the ill. Particulate matter--PM2.5 and PM10--far exceeds national and World Health Organization limits and is the main culprit for Delhi's high incidence of cardiovascular damage. The city's toxic air also contains high quantities of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and carbon monoxide, putting people at higher risk of strokes, heart attacks, and high blood pressure, and worsening the respiratory complications from COVID-19.

The main sources of Delhi's particulate emissions are, in equal measure, particles from large power plants and refineries, vehicles, and stubble burning. The experiences of Bangkok, Beijing, and Singapore suggest that an ambitious but feasible goal is to cut air pollution by one-third by 2025, which, if sustained, could extend people's lives by two to three years. The current effort is designed to confront all three sources, but strong implementation is needed.

Delhi is moving simultaneously on three fronts: energy, transport, and agriculture. In each case, East Asia offers valuable lessons.

Delhi, projected to be the world's most populous city by 2030, is motivated by a sense of urgency. Facing a growing environmental and health calamity, antipollution efforts are being strengthened. But to succeed, the different levels of government must harness the political will to invest more, coordinate across boundaries, and motivate businesses and residents to do their bit.

India's capital region of Delhi has suffered through a record-breaking heatwave this week as temperatures soar near 50C and scientists warn that climate change is exacerbating alarming conditions in the world's most populous country.

The capital region, home to more than 30mn people, recorded all-time high temperatures of more than 49C this week. The high daytime temperatures brought activity including construction work to a halt and prompted

authorities to ration water in order to control the strain on resources.

The heatwave has spread across India, with nearby states Haryana and Rajasthan registering temperatures higher than 50C. A weather station in Delhi reported a maximum temperature of 52.9C on Wednesday, though the India Meteorological Department later clarified that the reading might have been an error.

Scientists have warned that increasingly extreme summer heat has become a public health hazard in India, routinely exposing large numbers of people in the country of 1.4bn to risks such as heatstroke and even death.

While regions including Delhi have introduced heat action plans to improve early warning systems and manage the effects of extreme heat, analysts said far more investment was needed to mitigate the health and economic impacts of rising temperatures. The majority of Delhi's households do not have air conditioning, for example.

"This is like wartime," said Abhiyant Tiwari, an India-based climate analyst at the non-profit Natural Resources Defense Council. "We need to work on this issue throughout the year to better prepare our systems and our policies."

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