

## INDIA'S SMOG-CHOKED CAPITAL IMPOSES DRIVING RESTRICTIONS

**NEW DELHI:** New Delhi yesterday imposed driving restrictions that will take around a million cars off its roads for the second time this year, seeking to improve air quality in the world's most polluted capital. The Delhi government first introduced the experiment for two weeks in January as dangerous levels of haze choked the city and authorities said they were bringing it back for another 15 days by popular demand. "Odd-even is back because the people of Delhi wanted it," the city's transport minister Gopal Rai said yesterday, referring to the scheme that restricts cars to alternate days according to whether they carry odd or even-numbered licence plates.

"We have full faith that Delhi's people will follow this odd-even rule from today." A 2014 World Health Organization survey of more than 1,600

cities ranked Delhi as the most polluted, partly because of the nearly 10 million vehicles on its roads. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has said pollution levels fell after restrictions were imposed in January, but many scientists say the scheme is not enough to tackle the problem. "It is exactly like taking out 10 buckets of water from the ocean, the magnitude of the pollution problem is such," said Gufran Beig, the chief scientist at India's state-run System of Air Quality Weather Forecasting and Research.

### 'Should be permanent'

US embassy data showed PM 2.5 levels at an "unhealthy" 191 yesterday morning, meaning people with heart or respiratory problems, children and the elderly should stay indoors. These fine

particles measuring less than 2.5 micrometers are linked to higher rates of chronic bronchitis, lung cancer and heart disease. By afternoon they had fallen to a "moderate" 91. Pollution levels in Delhi generally rise overnight and fall as the day goes on.

Delhi commuters were broadly positive about the restrictions, with some calling for it to be made permanent though mostly because it freed up traffic on the city's usually clogged roads. "The best part about this (rule) is that I get to sleep more in the morning, knowing that I won't get stuck in traffic for hours to get to work. It's great," said Aniruddha Roy, a 33-year-old web developer. Another resident, Shruti Maheshwari, said, "the kind of joy and mental peace you get when you see hardly any cars on the roads, it really lifts

your mood for the day." "It can be a pain for some, but I think this is an initiative that should be made permanent," said the mother-of-two.

Women travelling alone or with young children and politicians, judges and police are all exempt, as are men taking their children to school. Scores of traffic police and volunteers took to the streets to enforce the scheme, wearing smog masks and holding banners urging drivers to comply. Most drivers appeared to be sticking to the rules yesterday and many took to cycling as an alternative, making Delhi's usually-clogged roads flow relatively freely. However, many offices and schools were shut yesterday, a public holiday in India, and the true test of the scheme will be when they reopen on Monday. — AFP

## RELIGION, RIGHTS, POLITICS CLASH OVER SIERRA LEONE ABORTION BILL

### UNSAFE ABORTIONS ACCOUNT FOR MATERNAL DEATHS

**FREETOWN:** When she was 15, long before she became gender adviser to Sierra Leone's president, Naasu Fofanah was raped by her church pastor. With her mother's help, she had an abortion, a decision she does not regret, even though it involved breaking the law. "That is the choice I want other girls and women to be able to make," Fofanah said in an interview. She stopped working for the president last year and now heads an organization combating sexual violence, angry that abortion is still illegal.

Since December, parliament, dominated by President Ernest Bai Koroma's party, has twice passed the "Safe Abortion Bill" which would scrap the current ban, both times with more than the two-thirds majority needed to override a presidential veto. Koroma has refused to sign it into law, however, saying it runs counter to the right to life enshrined in the constitution and should be put to a referendum. His opponents say the move is aimed at currying favor with powerful religious leaders, with some, including opposition politicians, asserting he will seek to stay in power after a constitutional two-term limit runs out next year. His spokesman said the president had made clear he had no such plan.

Almost all of Africa has restrictive abortion laws, and in much of West Africa it is outlawed, often under legislation dating from European rule, although some states allow it in certain circumstances, including if a mother's life is at risk. Supporters of repealing Sierra Leone's colonial-era abortion law say it is largely unenforced in practice. AdvocAid, a legal organization for women and girls, says it has handled just eight cases related to the law in the past eight years. Instead, the consequences of illegal abortion are primarily health-related. While Fofanah said her mother was able to find a doctor for

her abortion, many women have the procedure done by unqualified medics in private homes.

### Right to life

Sierra Leone has one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates, with healthcare weakened by a lingering two-year Ebola epidemic and the after-effects of a decade-long civil war that ended in 2002. Some 10 percent of maternal deaths resulted from unsafe abortions, according to a 2013 report by the Ministry of Health and Ipas, an organization that seeks to expand women's access to reproductive health services. The new abortion bill aims to reduce this figure by permitting access to an abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy or until week 24 in cases of rape, incest, or health risk to the foetus or the mother.

It has received endorsements from both the African Union and United Nations but has been denounced by religious leaders who regard the life of the foetus as sacrosanct. "The very title 'Safe Abortion Bill' is a contradiction in terms," Edward Tamba Charles, the Catholic archbishop in Freetown, said. "Whether it is done by a quack or by a professional, there is nothing like safe abortion because somebody's life is lost." Fofanah said some opponents of the law readily cite the right to life but keep silent on the maternal deaths that result from the practice being driven underground. "I also resent the hypocrisy in some of what these people are saying," she said.

### Politics

An open letter in January from the Inter Religious Council grouping the country's Muslim, Christian and traditional religious leaders said the bill ran counter to the constitution. Koroma agreed and his office sent a

memorandum to parliament in February arguing that an impending change to the current civil-war-era constitution, also via a referendum, made it an ideal time to run a referendum on the bill. But no date has been set for either public vote and his unusual decision to defy his own parliamentary majority prompted speculation in local media that politics may be playing a role.

Religious leaders hold enormous sway in Sierra Leonean society and many people look to them for guidance on political matters and during elections. "I think it's more about politics than any moral and religious convictions," said Ibrahim Tommy, executive director of the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law - a Freetown-based independent watchdog group. "It's really about the next elections." Opposition politicians say Koroma, who is due to step down at the end of 2018 in line with a constitutional two-term limit, is preparing to follow in the footsteps of other African leaders and stay on longer.

Some of his supporters say he needs more time to carry out work interrupted by the Ebola epidemic, but his spokesman Abdulai Bayraytay denied he was seeking a third term. "The president's decision not to sign the bill into law has nothing to do with an extension of his mandate. He has made it abundantly clear that he is not interested in an extension or a third term of office," Bayraytay said. Many women's rights activists in Sierra Leone say putting the bill to a referendum may take months or never materialize. However, Aisha Fofana Ibrahim, the president of gender-parity organization 50/50, says Sierra Leoneans would back the bill: "Many people think religious leaders have a lot of influence and many people think that they are speaking for the majority of Sierra Leoneans. I think they are not." — Reuters

## CHIMP FLEES JAPAN ZOO, CAUGHT AFTER FALLING FROM POWER POLE

**TOKYO:** A chimpanzee escaped from a zoo in northern Japan, climbed a tall electricity pole and then plunged from the wires into a blanket held by a dozen workers after being hit with a sedative arrow. Chacha, a male chimp, survived the fall with minor bruises and cuts, a zoo official said yesterday. The chimpanzee was on the loose for nearly two hours Thursday after it disappeared from the Yagiyama Zoological Park in Sendai, the city that's hosting finance ministers from the Group of Seven industrialized nations in May.

TV footage showed Chacha perched atop a pole, agitated and screaming at zoo workers below. A worker in a cherry picker shot the chimpanzee in the back with the arrow, sending it scampering along the wires. Chacha pulled the arrow out, but dangling from an electric line, appeared to lose its grip as the sedative took effect, and suddenly fell head down into the blanket. At 24, or middle age in human terms, the chimpanzee was waking up from the sedative and will be slow for a few days, zoo official Takashi Ito said. The zoo was closed Friday as officials investigated how it escaped. Zoo officials have spotted a hole in the fence, through which the chimpanzee apparently made his breakout. — AP



**SENDAI:** Chacha, the male chimp, falls off an electric pole, after being hit by a sedative arrow in Sendai, northern Japan. — AP