

## International

# 'It's killing us': Smog-choked roads take their toll in India

## Delhi ranked the world's worst capital for air quality

**NEW DELHI:** Stinging eyes, an unrelenting cough and chronic lung disease have taken their toll on Bhanjan Lal, an auto rickshaw driver navigating the Indian capital's chaotic roads and poisonous air. For the last three decades, Lal carted passengers along bumpy thoroughfares to temples, markets and offices in New Delhi, working every day through the winter months when a pall of toxic smog settles over the sprawling megacity. "The pollution causes a lot of problems for my throat," the 58-year-old told AFP, after a morning spent in the driver's seat of his motorized three-wheeler. "My eyes sting... My lungs are affected, which creates breathing problems. Mucus builds up and collects in my chest."

sorry looking at children and their health," said Lal. "They are already getting sick."

Lal's business suffers and he sometimes drives around the streets for an entire day without finding passengers, who prefer paying extra to sit through their commutes inside a cab. For those without the luxury of escaping the choking air, the health impacts are severe. AFP accompanied Lal to a doctor's check-up where he was diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, a progressive condition that gradually limits airflow to the body.

"If he doesn't take the regular medication now, he will go into a state where the airways will go narrowing and narrowing, and progressively worsening," said Vivek Nangia, Lal's doctor. Factory emissions, vehicle exhausts and crop-clearing fires from farms in neighboring states combine to cast the city of 20 million people in an otherworldly coat of yellow-grey haze near the end of each year. Piecemeal efforts to mitigate the smog, such as a public campaign encouraging drivers to turn off their engines at traffic lights, have failed to make an impact.



**NEW DELHI:** Commuters make their way amid smoggy conditions in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

“Pollution causes a lot of problems for my throat”

Delhi is consistently ranked the world's worst capital for air quality and on its most polluted days the smog can cut visibility on the roads to barely 50 meters. Levels of PM2.5 pollutants—the microparticles most harmful to human health, which can enter the bloodstream through the lungs—last week reached more than 30 times the maximum daily limit recommended by the World Health Organization. "I feel so

## Time shrinking for Iran nuclear deal, US envoy warns

**MANAMA:** The US envoy for Iran warned Friday that Tehran was approaching the point of no return for reviving a nuclear deal after it boosted its stocks of enriched uranium before talks resume this month. Robert Malley said Iran risked making it "impossible" to gain any benefit from resuming the agreement, which has been on hold since then president Donald Trump withdrew the United States from it in 2018. This week, with Iran set for talks with world powers in Vienna on November 29, the International Atomic Energy Agency said Tehran had again increased its stockpile of highly enriched uranium.

"The time will come if Iran continues at this pace with the advancements they've made, (it) will make it impossible even if we were going to go back to the JCPOA to recapture the benefits," Malley told the Manama Dialogue conference in Bahrain. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was the agreement struck in 2015 under which Iran agreed to clear limits on its nuclear activities in return for an easing of sanctions. "Iran's advances are spreading alarm across the region... that's what's making the clock tick faster and making all of us say that the time is short for a return to the JCPOA," Malley said.



On Wednesday, the US and its Gulf Arab allies accused Iran of causing a nuclear crisis and destabilizing the region with its ballistic missile program and support for armed militias. Malley said the US shared a "commonality of purpose" with rivals Russia and China "because we want to avoid that crisis, all of us, the crisis that would be sparked if Iran continues on its current path". "And I want to be clear, because there's no ambiguity about what they seem to be doing now, which is to drag their feet on the nuclear talks and accelerate the progress in their nuclear program."

The US envoy said he was not encouraged by the statements from the new Iranian government of President Ebrahim Raisi, which earlier on Friday accused Washington of conducting a "propaganda campaign" against the country. "If they stick to their public pronouncements, unfortunately we're not headed in the right direction... but let's wait to see what happens," he said, pledging that President Joe Biden would honour a revived deal.

"Our intent, our clear intent in coming back into the deal is to stick with the deal because we don't want to see a nuclear crisis," Malley said. Iran had reacted angrily to a US pledge to take its Gulf Arab allies' interests into account in any revived nuclear deal with their arch rival. "The US government, which is responsible for the current situation after withdrawing from the nuclear deal, is once again trying to provoke a crisis," foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh charged. In a tweet later, Malley said he had a "very constructive" phone call with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Ma Zhaoxun on the Iran talks. "Our three countries are in strong agreement on the need for a return to full compliance with the JCPOA," he said. "We are working together to achieve it by aligning our approaches as we head to the 7th round of talks," he said.—AFP

"I don't know from where the solution will come for this pollution, which is killing us," Delhi resident Vijay Satokar told AFP. "We have become a gas chamber." This week authorities took the drastic step of ordering six of the 11 coal power plants in Delhi's vicinity to close down until further notice. City officials also shut schools indefinitely, barred trucks except those carrying essential goods from entering the capital until next week, and told civil servants to work from home. But they stopped short of accepting a call by India's

### 'A gas chamber'

Supreme Court to declare the city's first "pollution lockdown", which would have restricted the population to their homes.

Smog is blamed for more than a million deaths in India annually, and a recent University of Chicago study found that air pollution was likely to reduce life expectancy by more than nine years for four in every 10 Indians. Authorities have struggled to address the root causes, with national coal consumption nearly doubling in the last decade. India fought more ambitious curbs on dirty energy at this month's COP26 climate summit, a move driven by its need for cheap fuel

to power its booming economy.

Rural agricultural workers meanwhile constitute a powerful voting bloc and year-end farm fires—the cheapest way to clear fields before the next growing season—continue unabated despite a ban two years ago. Winters in the capital, once appreciated for their mild weather after the long and scorching summer months, have become an annual endurance test for its inhabitants. "I find it so difficult to breathe living in Delhi," said local resident Dinesh Doval. "Sometimes I feel I should leave the city. But then where should I go?"—AFP



**PUNJAB PROVINCE:** Sikh devotees gather around a bus carrying the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book) during a religious procession on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism, in Nankana Sahib. — AFP

## Pakistanis welcome India Sikhs for Guru Nanak's birthday

**NANKANA SAHIB:** The scent of flowers and perfume hangs in the air as thousands of Sikhs from India were welcomed to Pakistan on Friday for one of the world's biggest birthday celebrations: the 552nd birth anniversary of the Guru Nanak. The festivities were taking place at the shrine to the founder of the Sikh religion in Nankana Sahib, the Pakistani city where he was born in 1469.

The emotion is heightened this year, as devotees from Pakistan's arch-rival India were unable to cross the border in 2020, due to coronavirus restrictions. "I have goosebumps, I can't explain how I'm feeling," Darshan Singh, a 70-year-old farmer from India, tells AFP. "I never thought we would get this sort of love from our Pakistani brothers," he says. "These women are not Sikh, these children know nothing about our faith, but they are standing up to welcome us with open arms and clean hearts."

Many others were similarly swept up in the rare sense of cross-border unity between Pakistanis and Indians, divided when the subcontinent was partitioned at independence in 1947. Annie Munjal, a 24-year-old from Delhi, says her grandparents often told her stories of growing up in Pakistan's Lahore, near the Indian border, before partition. "We had heard from them how Pakistan was, but we never got to see," she says. "Now we are here... they are just like us." The celebration of more than 12,000 people at the shrine, or gurdwara, is infectious.

Curious Muslim residents of the city stand on their rooftops to watch, and shower the Sikh processions

## Georgia's ex-leader ends hunger strike

**TBILISI:** Georgia's jailed opposition leader and ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili ended his 50-day hunger strike yesterday after he was moved to a military hospital from a prison clinic, his doctor said. The flamboyant pro-Western reformer launched a hunger strike after being jailed upon his return from exile in Ukraine on October 1, saying his arrest was political.

On Thursday, Saakashvili, 53, fainted and doctors urged authorities to move him to a regular clinic, saying his life was in danger. Georgian authorities had initially rejected the medical recommendations, but Justice Minister Rati Bregadze said Friday they were open to moving Saakashvili to a military hospital "where his health and security will be protected at most by the state."

In the early hours of yesterday, Saakashvili "was transferred from a prison hospital to a military clinic" in the city of Gori, some 90 kilometers west of the capital Tbilisi, his lawyer Dito Sadzaglishvili told AFP. His personal doctor, Nikoloz Kipshidze, said "(Former) president Saakashvili formally called off his hunger

with rose petals and chocolates. At the main gates, young Muslims and Hindus join Sikhs in dancing to the beat of the dhol, a South Asian drum. Posters welcoming the pilgrims alternate with heavy security on the streets leading to the shrine. The devotees, many of them barefoot, wave saffron flags as they sing hymns and recite poetry and religious texts - all before a massive lunch of rice, naan, chickpeas and sweets.

### 'Long wait is over'

The first of ten gurus who developed the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak's teachings laid the basis for a community that now numbers up to 30 million across the world. But most of the faithful are now in India, where their families fled the sectarian violence that claimed millions of lives during partition. It was only in 2019 that Pakistan opened a visa-free corridor allowing Sikhs from India to visit Kartarpur, a town where another shrine built to mark the guru's death lies. That white-domed gurdwara was so close to the border that for decades devotees in India could see it, but not visit - a situation akin to Muslims being able to see Medina but never enter.

The Covid-19 pandemic prevented Indians from crossing in 2020. This year authorities agreed to reopen the corridor, and the faithful began streaming across in preparation for the birthday celebrations this week. Some stayed in Kartarpur, while many made their way 180 kilometers southwest to join those celebrating in Nankana Sahib. "My years long wait is finally over. I am steps away from my guru's home," Buljit Kaur, a 61-year-old pilgrim from India, tells AFP in Nankana Sahib.

Pervaiz Ahmed, a 41 year old local doctor was coming out of a mosque on the same street as the gurdwara. "Sikhs find their roots here, this is the place they belong to. We have no objections seeing them coming in such big numbers," he said. The Indian farmer, Darshan Singh, says he will return with his family. "This is the first time I came to Gurdwara Nankana Sahib, and it looks like I have wasted 70 years of my life," he says. "The emotions and feelings cannot be explained."—AFP

strike right after he was transferred to the Gori military hospital. "He still is in a life-threatening condition and was placed in an intensive care ward," Kipshidze told AFP, adding that Saakashvili's "refeeding will begin later on."

### 'Illegal imprisonment'

"I will never accept my illegal imprisonment," Saakashvili said on Facebook Friday evening, adding that he was ready to "appear before a fair trial and accept any verdict it delivers." In 2018, Saakashvili was sentenced in absentia to six years in jail for "abuse



**TBILISI:** Georgians rally to demand the release of the jailed ex-president and opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili in Tbilisi. — AFP

## Censors, legal hurdles stifle China's #MeToo movement

**BEIJING:** China's #MeToo movement has stumbled in the face of swift internet censors, a patriarchal society and a legal system that places a heavy burden on the claimant. Explosive claims this month by tennis star Peng Shuai that a former top Communist Party politician had sexually assaulted her marked the first time allegations have hit the top layer of government. But her accusations were swiftly scrubbed from the Chinese internet, and she has not been seen publicly since.

Others have faced the same fate, with an increasingly austere Beijing cracking down on any form of grassroots social movement. The global #MeToo movement reached China in 2018 when a wave of women published allegations of sexual harassment against university professors. Threatened by the prospect of an uncontrolled mass movement, authorities quickly began blocking social media hashtags and keywords. The phrase #MeToo is still blocked.

Prominent feminists face regular police harassment and detention — including activist Sophia Huang Xueqin, arrested in September for "inciting subversion of state power", according to Reporters Without Borders. Although leader Xi Jinping has declared women are "an important force driving social development and progress", there are barely any women in key government roles in China. Political leadership is a man's world, with only one woman in the Communist Party's elite 25-member Politburo. Xi has also been aggressively pushing a conservative narrative of women as mothers and wives. New legislation clarifying the concept of sexual harassment passed last year in China, but accusers still face major obstacles. "You have to constantly prove you're honest... and that you're not using this issue to hype yourself," a woman who had made an allegation of sexual misconduct told AFP, asking to remain unidentified as she feared retaliation. But for the accused, "it's actually very simple", she said. "He can just deny it and does not need to prove his innocence."—AFP

of office" - charges he had rejected as trumped up and politically motivated. The United States Department of State has urged the Georgian authorities to "treat Mr. Saakashvili fairly and with dignity, including right to fair trial." "As soon as I am set free, I'll join you - as equal among equals - in rebuilding our country," Saakashvili wrote in an address to the nation. He thanked Georgians for the "unbelievable show of solidarity and humanity" and called for a campaign "to liberate the country" from the rule of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party. "I believe in our victory as never before."—AFP