

Gasping for a fresh breath in India

NEW DELHI

The severe pollution crisis and a lack of resolution drive oxygen bar demand

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As air pollution shot up to dangerous levels across India last week, underscoring an already dire public health crisis, a crowd descended on a small shop in New Delhi for a novel solution: a 15-minute hit of clean oxygen.

At Oxy Pure, a self-styled “oxygen bar,” customers strapped tubes to their noses and inhaled scents of lavender, lemongrass or spearmint. In the absence of other options, Lisa Dwivedi, a Ukrainian living in the city, said she had come to the bar because she was fed up with having itchy eyes, a runny nose and a swollen throat.

“I don’t know if it’s psychological, but it makes me feel good to know I am inhaling pure oxygen, if only for 15 minutes,” she said.

The air pollution crisis in India has become so severe that officials in the capital declared a public health emergency earlier this month, when levels of deadly particulate matter rose to a few dozen times what the World Health Organization considers safe.

Doctors are reporting a surge of patients with severe respiratory problems. Last week, New Delhi’s government shut all primary schools for a second time this month because of pollution in the capital region, home to more than 46 million people.

But despite air so scary that it may be causing brain damage in children, some central government officials have either resisted acknowledging the problem, which has persisted in India for years, or minimized its severity.

During an especially poisonous day, when levels of PM 2.5, tiny, cancer-linked particulate matter, rose to some 60 times the safe limit in parts of the capital, Harsh Vardhan, India’s health minister, recommended eating carrots to fight harmful effects.

Another senior lawmaker criticized those who tried to stop farmers from burning their crops and instead suggested praying to the Hindu god of rain for relief.



A customer inhaling scented oxygen at the Oxy Pure shop in a mall in New Delhi. With air pollution at dangerous levels, the city has declared a public health crisis.

SMITA SHARMA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

So far this month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has refrained from publicly commenting on the air pollution. His office recently set up a panel to look into it, but a high-level parliamentary meeting on Friday about the pollution was canceled because hardly any officials showed up, according to Indian news outlets.

“People are dying, and it cannot happen in a civilized country,” Supreme Court judges said this month about the

pollution. “We will not tolerate this. We are making a mockery of everything.”

With no imminent solutions, some Indians have tried to step in — with solutions like the oxygen bar.

As winds slow during winter months and farmers burn crops to make room for a new harvest, dirty air settles over India’s cities, mixing with construction dust, power plant emissions and fumes from bursting fireworks as people celebrate festivals.

Many Indians have become fatalistic about the government’s taking tougher steps to clean the air, if they even know how dangerous it has become.

Without consistent and strong public messaging, pollution masks remain uncommon in India.

Those who wear them are sometimes laughed at.

This month, people waded into the capital’s stretch of the Yamuna River, which is largely untreated sewage, to

wash, clean their utensils and even take selfies with the icebergs of floating foam formed by industrial waste.

Last week, despite the government shutdown of schools on Thursday and Friday, a nonprofit organization sponsored an outdoor run for children. Hundreds of people participated and event banners bore the logo for the state-owned Life Insurance Corporation of India.

During parts of November, officials in

New Delhi have tried to ease the pollution by restricting the use of private vehicles on alternating days, allowing only cars with odd-number license plates to drive on odd-number dates and cars with even-number plates on even-number dates.

But efforts like this appeared to have a marginal effect on the air, which remained “severe” throughout the capital last week, according to data from the Delhi Pollution Control Committee.

For Indians worried about the air, options have largely been restricted to buying purifiers, sealing cracks in their homes with blankets and towels, or leaving toxic cities entirely. India’s poorest residents have no choice but to sleep outside in the fog.

Without strong public messaging, pollution masks remain uncommon. Those who wear them can be laughed at.

At Oxy Pure, which is in Select Citywalk, a more upscale mall in New Delhi, customers pay \$4 to \$6 for 15 minutes of oxygen carried through a nasal cannula. Oxy Pure has introduced a “pollution special”: five sessions for the price of four.

The owner, Aryavir Kumar, who originally worked as a hotelier, said he did not make a profit from the business, which opened in May. But he plans to open locations in the capital’s airport, and in the cities of Mumbai and Bangalore.

“Customers say, ‘Now we have to buy fresh air?’” he said in an interview. “I tell them, ‘Do you not also pay for a bottle of clean drinking water, something you did not do 20 years ago?’”

On Friday morning, Vikram Aiyer, 25, a clean shaven business executive, stopped into the small store, with its floor-to-ceiling garden installation, water fountains and a replica of a Van Gogh painting, before going to work as a salesman.

He chose eucalyptus as his scent and an attendant in a white lab coat fitted his nostrils with tubes attached to a beaker containing a green liquid. Mr. Aiyer sat in a leathery chair and took a deep breath.

“The thought of unadulterated oxygen pumps up my flagging morale in this city,” he said, closing his eyes and exhaling.