

India's Bid to Fight Air Pollution Falters

BY SHAN LI

NEW DELHI—As the skies turned hazy with pollution this winter, a giant outdoor purifier sat dormant in the Indian capital's central business district.

The smog tower, lined with double rows of fans, was intended to purify the surrounding area by sucking in smog, passing it through filters on the inside and releasing clean air. But the contraption hasn't worked for over a year.

"That's so stupid," said college student Suhani Shrivastava, gesturing toward the tower as she walked by. "It doesn't work and it doesn't make any sense."

The 19-year-old said she is sick every winter with congested lungs and a sore throat. She blames the government for what she says is wasting taxpayer money on useless tools that don't make a dent in the toxic air that afflicts one of the world's most polluted cities.

"I feel like I'm taking in cancer," she said, between bouts of coughing. "It's like the government has given up. They don't care."

Delhi's air quality declines sharply starting each October as farmers to the west of the capital set fires to clear crop stubble from their fields. Winds carry those particles to the city where they mix with emissions from vehicles, power plants and factories. Cooler temperatures prevent the polluted air from dispersing as it does in summer.

Experts said government

efforts to combat pollution, often announced with fanfare as winter approaches, have been ineffective.

The ruling party in Delhi, the Aam Aadmi Party, has deployed drones to monitor pollution hot spots and 200 mobile "antismog guns," which are vehicles mounted with water cannons that drive around the city misting the air. It has also lobbied national authorities to be allowed to use artificial rain to clear the skies.

"Those are Band-Aid solutions, knee-jerk proposals to a grave situation," said Vimlendu Jha, an air-quality expert based in Delhi.

On Nov. 18, a key measure of air pollution reached a level more than 100 times the limits the World Health Organization considers safe, according to calculations from the environmental think tank Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air.

Even residents who typically shrug off the smog bemoaned the pollution and scoffed at official efforts. Some reported that the air inside their offices and homes was hazy.

Yash Vardhan, a 26-year-old pharmacist, said he was splashed once by the spray from an antismog gun while trying to overtake the slow-moving truck on his scooter. He was mystified by the machine's purpose until a friend said it was a pollution-fighting tool.

Vardhan said he gives the government some credit for deploying the smog guns. "At least the government is trying to prove to people that they