

India's Modi urges citizens to cut back on fuel

PM asks people to work from home and reduce travel amid surging energy prices

SAMAAN LATEEF MUMBAI

A senior Indian judge gave up his official car and security convoy last week to demonstrate what Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called a patriotic duty. Dwarka Dhish Bansal cycled to court through the streets of Jabalpur in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh after Mr. Modi appealed to the country to work from home and minimize the use of fuel amid a surge in energy prices caused by war in the Middle East.

The judge said he travelled from his residence to the courthouse by bicycle to demonstrate that even senior public officials can make small sacrifices during a national crisis.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi has appealed to citizens to save fuel," Justice Bansal said. "Keeping that in mind, I felt I should cycle from my home to the High Court and send a message to ordinary citizens that, wherever possible, they should also use bicycles for short distances."

"Just because we are High Court judges does not mean we are special," he added. "Everyone should cycle whenever possible."

The rupee hit record lows in recent weeks amid surging inflation caused by the collapse of oil supplies through the Strait of Hormuz, as Iran continues to choke off travel through the vital waterway to put pressure on the United States and its Persian Gulf allies.

India imports more than 80 per cent of its crude oil, leaving the country especially vulnerable to global price shocks. (A related shortage of liquefied petroleum gas is forcing poorer families to resort to firewood to cook meals.)



India's Prime Minister called on commuters to rely more on public transportation, carpooling and electric vehicles to reduce fuel consumption.

RITESH SHUKLA/
GETTY IMAGES

With Brent crude climbing to more than US\$109 a barrel Friday, New Delhi raised gas and diesel prices by three rupees a litre in a bid to curb consumption.

Speaking at public events in Hyderabad and Vadodara last week, Mr. Modi urged Indians to embrace what he called "nationally responsible" lifestyle choices, comparing the "duty" of citizens during the energy crisis to that of soldiers in war.

He said "patriotic" Indians should avoid unnecessary foreign travel and stop buying gold and other foreign goods to conserve foreign exchange. The Prime Minister encouraged companies to revive work-from-home arrangements introduced during the pandemic and urged schools to conduct online classes where feasible.

He also asked farmers to cut fertilizer use in half and called on commuters to rely more on public transportation, carpool-

ing and electric vehicles to reduce fuel consumption.

"We must curb our use of petrol and diesel," Mr. Modi said in Vadodara. "Whenever India faced war or any major crisis, citizens fulfilled their responsibility on the government's appeal. We need to do the same now."

"Every small and big effort matters," he added. "We must reduce unnecessary dependence on imported goods in our daily lives."

Across Indian cities, some residents have already begun adjusting their routines.

In Mumbai, Clavell Rodriguez, a 34-year-old sales manager, said his company had reduced in-person meetings and encouraged employees to work remotely three days a week.

"We have started shifting many of our meetings online," Mr. Rodriguez said. "When the Prime Minister asks people to make sacrifices, it makes you realize the situation may become

much more difficult in the coming months."

In Hyderabad, Asif Farooq, who works at ICICI Bank, said he had stopped driving to work and now commutes by bus.

"Many of my colleagues used to drive their own cars to the office," Mr. Farooq said. "After Modi's appeal, most of us shifted to public transport. It saves a lot of money and makes us feel we are at least doing something to prepare for tougher times ahead."

Yet Mr. Modi's appeal has also drawn criticism.

Opposition politicians and several commentators have pointed out that Mr. Modi himself recently participated in multiple political rallies and attended a large air show while urging ordinary citizens to reduce travel and consumption.

"These events raise a question: While the country needs to come together to tackle such a crisis, are only common citizens expected to make sacrifices?" said Priyanshi Sharma, a co-founder of media startup Peek TV.

The Karnataka State Travel Operators Association warned that widespread work-from-home policies and reduced travel could damage industries still recovering from the economic shocks of the pandemic.

In a statement, the association said millions of jobs tied to commuting, tourism and small transport businesses could be endangered if companies were to sharply curtail commuting and business travel.

The group urged the government to focus on fuel security measures, diplomatic efforts to alleviate global energy shortages and financial support for vulnerable transport operators.

Mr. Modi has drawn parallels with India's pandemic response, saying the country had overcome one of "the worst crises of the century" and could also withstand the crisis caused by the war in Iran.

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