

# South Asia smothered by smog

A rapid rise in air pollution from fossil fuels and biomass burning has worsened winter smog and extended its duration in many parts of South Asia, scientists and officials have said.

In Bangladesh, India and Nepal the temperature has plummeted and clouds of fog and smoke hang in the sky blocking sunlight for several days. Normal lives have been affected with many flights diverted and suspended and trains delayed because of low visibility.

Experts say they have noticed that the intensity of smog has grown in the Indo-Gangetic plains in the last few years, leading to increased impacts. 'Since 1990 onwards, there has been increase in the number of smog-affected days in northern India,' says BP Yadav, director of the Indian Meteorological Department. It is not a linear trend showing an increase every year. There are, of course, year-to-year fluctuations. But there are more years that have seen dense fogs.'

Nepal's Department of Hydrology and Meteorology director-general Keshav Prasad Sharma agrees the issue of smog is becoming increasingly serious in the plains in southern Nepal bordering India. Until 10 years ago, we did not have such dense fog for long durations like we have these days,' he says. 'Although the 10-year period is too short for statistical trends, it is indeed being seen as a major issue now.'

Some are also investigating whether the conditions can be linked to health problems in parts of the region. Although widely reported as the direct effect of a cold wave, medical professionals say deaths and illnesses are often related to respiratory diseases.

'None of our patients died of hypothermia,' says senior consultant physician Gaurang Mishra of a regional referral hospital in south-eastern Nepal where dozens of people have been reported to have died during the last three weeks that saw many smoggy days. 'They mostly suffer from chronic pulmonary obstructive disease that is caused by burning of wood and cow-dung cake and pollution from industries and vehicles, mainly during winter season.'

The number of such patients, particularly children and elderly people, is also in the rise in Bangladesh. 'But it is not just about people's health in our country,' says

Iqbal Habib of the Bangladesh Environment Movement (BAPA). ‘At times, all means of transport come to a complete halt because of zero visibility and all walks of lives are affected. The working hours come down to as little as four hours a day.’

Experts say besides regular sources like vehicles, industrial factories, power plants and dust from gravelled roads, air pollution in some areas in Bangladesh is getting worse because of fast increasing numbers of brick kilns. Some studies have shown that they account for around 40 per cent of air pollution in and around the capital Dhaka.

‘Since we have a sustainable economic growth rate, we need more bricks and the number of brick kilns is going up day by day,’ admits Monowar Islam, director general of Bangladesh’s Department of Environment. ‘We know the situation is becoming serious but it is not alarming. We have been demolishing unauthorised brick kilns and have been implementing the World Bank-supported clean air and sustainable environment project through which we patronise new technologies that reduce air pollution.’

Just like in Bangladesh, India also sees lots of constructions during winter as this is the dry season before the region gets monsoon rainfall preventing such works (BBC 7-1-12).