



The holiday market on the street in front of Motijheel Ideal School and College bustled with customers yesterday as crowds of shoppers thronged the area ahead of Eid.

PHOTO: MEHEDI HASAN

Air pollution driving up respiratory diseases

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 data showing a steady increase in patient numbers.

Linking the rise in respiratory cases to air pollution, NIDCH Director Golam Sarwar Liaquat Hossain Bhuiyan said, "During the dry season, germs remain suspended in the air, and people inhale them. That is why more and more people suffer from respiratory diseases at this time."

"Air pollution of various types – dust, vehicle fumes and emissions from brick kilns – has increased, posing significant health risks, particularly respiratory problems. As a result, we are seeing a higher number of patients with asthma and COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease]," he told The Daily Star on February 25.

He further said patients with asthma, in particular, suffer from symptoms such as cough, shortness of breath and wheezing. They can otherwise lead normal, healthy lives, but when they come into contact with certain triggering factors like air pollution, their symptoms worsen and the disease goes out of control.

Many patients come to the outdoor department with symptoms such as cough that doesn't subside easily, he said.

"Most people are engaged in some form of work, and when they go to their workplaces, they are exposed to these pollutants. Due to this repeated exposure, the number of such patients at the outdoor department has increased."

With Dhaka and other major cities seeing a rise in air pollution,

the number of patients at NIDCH – the top referral centre for respiratory diseases in the country – increased to 1.95 lakh last year from 1.92 lakh in 2024. The number was 1.75 lakh in 2023; 1.62 lakh in 2022; and 1.28 lakh in 2021, show the data.

Of the 1.95 lakh patients last year, the highest number – 1.60 lakh – sought care at the outdoor department, while 19,461 received treatment at the emergency unit and 15,886 were admitted to the hospital, according to the data.

Patients of all ages – from neonates to elderly people – visited the hospital, with those aged between 25 and 49 dominating the tally.

Health experts warn that health risks are especially high for patients with already-compromised lungs.

Safiqul Islam, an associate professor at NIDCH, said, "Air pollution is very dangerous for people with post-tuberculosis complications, pneumonia, or congenital lung problems. We are observing a rise in such patients at the hospital."

One such patient is 50-year-old Abdur Razzaq, who came to NIDCH on February 23. He had undergone treatment around three years ago when fluid accumulated in his lungs.

The street vendor from Narayanganj's Bhulta said he remains exposed to polluted air as he lives and works in an industrial area.

"I have been suffering from cough over the last few days and consulted a local doctor. He advised me to undergo some tests," Razzaq said.

Shihab Uddin, an employee of a

private company in Motijheel, said, "My daughter suffers from sinusitis and often falls ill due to air pollution. Her condition gets better in the monsoon when rains bring down the pollution level."

VERY UNHEALTHY AIR

As the dry season continues, Dhaka city's air quality has remained at unhealthy levels for more than a month. The city's Air Quality Index (AQI) crossed 300 on February 25 and 26, placing it in the "hazardous" category.

In Savar, the situation was even worse. The AQI there hit 443 on February 26 while it was 418 the day before, according to real-time data from the Department of Environment (DoE) which classifies an AQI above 300 as hazardous.

On both days, Dhaka's air quality was the worst among major cities across the globe, with an average AQI of 177 and 172. Beijing and Kathmandu jointly ranked second, according to IQAir, a Switzerland based private company that monitors air quality.

Between 1998 and 2023, Bangladesh saw a 66 percent surge in PM2.5 pollution caused by fine particulate matter measuring 2.5 micrometres or less in diameter, shows the Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) published by the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago in October last year.

Last year, the annual average PM2.5 level in Dhaka stood at 90.35 microgrammes per cubic metre, about 16 times the annual limit of 5µg/m³ recommended by the WHO,

underscoring a severe public health risk.

The PM2.5 level rises significantly during the dry season compared to other times of the year. Last month, Dhaka's average PM2.5 concentration rose to 193 microgrammes per cubic metre – 38 times higher than the WHO standard.

According to last year's report by the Energy Policy Institute, air pollution is cutting Bangladeshis' average life expectancy by 5.5 years, making it the country's deadliest external health risk.

It warns that the health toll caused by particulate matter pollution far exceeds that of tobacco use, malnutrition, or unsafe water. Smoking cuts life expectancy by about two years, while malnutrition reduces it by 1.4 years.

When contacted, DoE Additional Director General Ziaul Haque said there has been a sharp rise in air pollution in the capital. "The burning of solid waste in Matuail, Amin Bazar and several other areas could be contributing to the spike."

In August last year, the interim government declared Savar a degraded airshed and halted operations of 106 brick kilns. However, 30 to 40 kiln owners obtained permission from the High Court last month to resume activities.

DoE sources said brick kilns account for around 58 percent of Dhaka city's total air pollution, with vehicle emissions, construction activities and other sources contributing the remainder.

generated within these waste piles causes fires to persist once they are ignited.

Asked, Dr Mohammed Shafiqullah Siddique Bhuiya, supervising engineer of the Waste Management Department of Dhaka South City Corporation, also said these fires start spontaneously.

"Waste has been accumulating at the site for 35 to 40 years, forming multiple layers where methane and greenhouse gases have built up. When daily waste is deposited, the presence of any flammable substances can react with the accumulated methane, triggering fires."

Approached, a middle-aged man exclaimed, "Our lives are cursed. What more do you want to know from us?"

The man, Tayeb Mia, a farmer and a permanent resident of the area, said they live adjacent to the Aminbazar landfill, where smoke from burning polythene-mixed waste has been choking locals for two months.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore; what is the use of talking?" he asked before leaving the spot in frustration.

In August last year, the then government had declared the Savar area a degraded airshed, and the operations of 106 brick kilns, except "Tunnel kilns" and "hybrid hoffman kilns", were halted from September.

In a circular, the government had also banned the open burning of solid waste and the issuance of clearances for industries that may cause air pollution.

Yet, smoke generated from the Amin Bazar dumping site has been causing severe health hazards to locals.

"Additionally, around 30 to 40 brick kilns reopened as owners obtained permission from the High Court and restarted their activities last month," said Deputy Director of the DoE Mohammad Abdul Motilab.

During a visit to Rony Bricks Co in Savar's Bhakurta area, a notice citing a HC directive was found posted at the entrance, requesting relevant

authorities not to disrupt operations in accordance with the order in Writ Petition No-15982/2025.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Enayet Hossain, who oversees the kiln, said the HC granted them six months of operational permission after they filed a petition citing financial losses. He claimed many other kiln owners in Savar are also operating under similar court directives.

According to DoE sources, brick kilns contribute around 58 percent of Dhaka's total air pollution.

Burning solid waste, along with smoke from industries and brick kilns and emissions from old vehicles, generates PM2.5 (particles smaller than 2.5 micrometres) in the air – considered the main pollutant in Dhaka's air.

PM2.5 RISING; AUTHORITIES IDLE
 Between 1998 and 2023, the country's PM2.5 pollution surged by 66 percent, according to the global annual report of the Air Quality Life Index, published by the Energy Policy Institute of the University of Chicago.

Last year, Dhaka's annual average PM2.5 level stood at 90.35 microgrammes per cubic metre – around 18 times higher than the WHO recommended annual limit of 5 microgrammes per cubic metre.

Generally, during the dry season, the PM2.5 level surges higher than in other months of the year.

In January 2026, Dhaka's average PM2.5 concentration rose to 193 per cubic metre – 38 times higher than the WHO standard.

BREATHING TOXIC AIR
 Just in 2023, 271,000 people in Bangladesh died from air pollution-related causes that year, according to a global report.

Over 90 percent of those deaths were linked to noncommunicable diseases, such as heart and lung ailments, diabetes and dementia, said the sixth edition of the State of Global Air 2025.

(Our Savar correspondent contributed to this report)

'Stop the war'

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After nearly two weeks of war, 2,000 people have been killed, most of them in Iran, but many also in Lebanon and a growing number in the Gulf, which has, for the first time in decades of Middle East conflicts, found itself on the front line. Several million people have been displaced from their homes.

As Israeli warplanes pounded Beirut's suburbs with air strikes, Lebanon's interior minister said authorities were unable to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of people who have sought refuge in the capital.

Israel also dropped leaflets threatening Gaza-scale devastation as it deployed more troops to fight Hezbollah and warned of more attacks on Lebanon's infrastructure.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards announced yesterday that they had launched missiles and drones at Israel in coordination with Hezbollah.

Several homes in a Bedouin Arab town near an air base in northern Israel were heavily damaged overnight.

Later in the day, smoke could be seen rising from two locations around Tel Aviv, AFP journalists said, after blasts were heard following a warning that missiles were fired from Iran.

US forces have also suffered casualties. The US military confirmed that all six crew members aboard a refuelling aircraft that crashed in western Iraq were dead.

Iranian drones were reported flying into Kuwait, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman.

The Israeli military launched strikes across Tehran. It said its air force had struck more than 200 targets in western and central Iran over the past day.

Iranian Press TV said a woman had been killed by an airstrike close to a rally in Tehran for Quds (Jerusalem) Day,

one of many across Iran in support of Palestinians living in Israeli occupied territory.

President Masoud Pezeshkian, Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi and security chief Ali Larijani all appeared in videos verified by Reuters openly attending the rally in a gesture of defiance, despite an assertion by US Defense Secretary Peter Hegseth that the leadership were "cowering" underground.

The war has sparked a critical shortage of cooking gas in India, a country with longstanding ties to Iran. Iran has allowed two Indian-flagged liquefied petroleum gas carriers to sail through the Strait of Hormuz, four sources told Reuters.

The US waiver on Russian oil was welcomed in Moscow but left Kyiv and its allies angry.

Trump said he thinks Russian President Vladimir Putin may be helping Iran a "little bit" in the interview with Fox News Radio that aired on Friday.

"I think he might be helping him (Iran) a little bit, yeah, I guess. And he probably thinks we're helping Ukraine, right?" Trump told "The Brian Kilmeade Show", without specifying the nature of that help.

The Washington Post reported last week that Russia was providing Iran with targeting information that included locations of U.S. warships and aircraft in the Middle East. Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff later said Russia had denied doing so, and "we can take them at their word."

Iran's new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, in his first public comments on Thursday, vowed to keep the Strait of Hormuz shut and urged neighbouring countries to close US bases on their territory or risk being attacked themselves.

Govt moves to secure fertilisers

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heightened reliance on imports amid global market volatility, rising freight costs, and vessel shortages.

A top official of the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC), speaking to The Daily Star on condition of anonymity, said a meeting held a few days ago between the ministries of agriculture, finance, and the Energy Division finalised the decision to procure fertiliser.

The official said that of the five lakh tonnes, three lakh tonnes would be imported through government-to-government arrangements, while the remaining two lakh tonnes would be procured through open tenders.

Discussions are also underway on whether fertiliser can be transported via alternative routes under the existing government to government agreement with Saudi Arabia, the official said.

At the same time, preparations are being made to invite local and international tenders, the official added.

Meanwhile, a shipment of urea fertiliser, which was scheduled to reach Bangladesh from the United Arab Emirates, is currently stuck there due to the ongoing war. It is expected that the ship will set sail for Bangladesh once the situation stabilises and a safe maritime route is ensured, the official added.

In Bangladesh, urea fertiliser is produced and imported by the BCIC.

Non-urea fertilisers, such as diammonium phosphate (DAP), Triple Super Phosphate (TSP), and Muriate of Potash (MoP), are imported by the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC).

Ahmed Faisal Imam, additional secretary for the fertiliser management and monitoring branch at the agriculture ministry, said that at this moment, the country has urea stock until June, while non-urea fertiliser stock will last until October. Currently, there is no fertiliser crisis in the country.

The total fertiliser demand in the country is around 68 to 69 lakh tonnes, of which the demand for urea is 26 lakh tonnes, according to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

Imam added that an agreement with Egypt is expected to be signed next month.

A BCIC official said China and the UAE have made proposals to sell Bangladesh fertilisers.

Bangladesh usually imports fertilisers from Canada, Russia, Saudi Arabia, China, Morocco, and Tunisia.

Saudi Arabia is one of the main sources of DAP used in Bangladesh. Last year, the BADC purchased 6,00,000 tonnes of the fertiliser from the country and has set a target of importing the same amount this year.

However, due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, Bangladesh's DAP imports from Saudi Arabia have become uncertain.

The official added that Egypt has

US launches labour probe

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to compete against foreign producers who may have an artificial cost advantage gained from the scourge of forced labour," USTR Ambassador Jamieson Greer said.

The investigations will determine whether foreign governments have taken sufficient steps to prohibit the import of goods produced with forced labour and how the failure to eradicate the "abhorrent practices" impacts US workers and businesses, he said.

The initiative under Section 301(b) of the Trade Act of 1974 came just a day after the Trump administration said it was launching unfair trade investigations into excess industrial capacity in 16 countries in the first set of probes.

Section 301 of the act is designed to

address unfair foreign practices affecting US commerce and may be used to respond to unjustifiable, unreasonable or discriminatory foreign government practices that burden or restrict US commerce. Under Section 302(b), the USTR may self-initiate an investigation.

Before launching the probes, the Trump administration considered the advice of the inter-agency Section 301 Committee and consulted with appropriate advisory committees.

The USTR has already requested consultations with the governments of the relevant economies. It will hold hearings on April 28.

To be assured of consideration, the interested persons should submit written comments, requests to appear at the hearing along with a summary of the testimony by April 15.