

Breathe easy, breathe clean during Commonwealth Games

Athletes and intending visitors can breathe easy about the 2010 Commonwealth Games. India has come up with technology for air quality management even as this city is working on reducing air pollution during the mega event.

This should come as good news for Delhi residents as well. The Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune, has for the first time in the country developed what it calls the System of Air Pollution Forecasting and Research (SAFAR) that will be functioning by April.

'The system will tell us the quality of air at a given moment and also what it will be 24 hours later, thus alerting people and helping them avoid immediate exposure to unhealthy air,' Gufran Beig, SAFAR scientist and project director, told IANS.

SAFAR will provide information on air quality on an hourly basis and forecast pollution levels 24 hours in advance through wireless colour digital display panels located at 10 key points in the city during the Games.

'On any day, if the pollution level is high, the Delhi government might order closing of shops or reducing traffic flow,' Indian Meteorological Department director Ajit Tyagi told IANS.

Some athletes have hinted at skipping the Games as they fear Delhi air is unsafe to breathe. But the Games Organising Committee says it is committed to ensuring clean air during the Oct 3-14 event, dubbed as the first ever Green Games.

The organisers are confident that the existing traffic density can be reduced drastically by making the quality of public transportation more appealing.

The Indian capital is among the most polluted cities in the world. Its major problem is an ever-growing number of cars, three- and two- wheelers and they occupy a staggering 75 percent of the road space, although only 20 percent of the commuting public use them.

Delhi has over five million vehicles and another one million come to the metropolis from towns in the national capital region in adjoining states.

China had a tough time battling air pollution during the Olympic Games last year and there are doubts whether Delhi can be as effective as Beijing in enforcing traffic curbs, raising emission standards and stopping Games' construction work well in time to improve air quality.

But India is hard at work to ensure a pollution-free event.

SAFAR will provide the air quality levels in a four-kilometre stretch around the Games village and other major venues. Instruments like ozone and carbon monoxide analysers and real time analysers for various other pollutants would be used for collecting the data.

SAFAR will provide details about oxides of nitrogen, carbon monoxide, particulate matter, black carbon and benzene present in Delhi air.

'Exposure to the pollutants will affect human health, increased respiratory symptoms, heart and lung diseases, allergies being some of them,' said Beig.

SAFAR's inputs will greatly help in identifying the major sources of air pollutants and recommending measures to help improve the air quality.

Only a few developed countries have the technical knowhow to use the system. It was used during the Olympic Games in Beijing and also at the last Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.

'SAFAR will make India one of the few countries to take a big leap in environmental research,' Beig said.

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