

HT SPOTLIGHT

Dust cloud blankets northern plains, flight services crippled

CHOKING Dust, thunder storms leave 15 dead, 28 injured in UP; weather dept says conditions to prevail for 3-4 days

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NEW DELHI/LUCKNOW/CHANDIGARH: A cloud of dust hung over vast swathes of north Indian plains for the third day in a row on Thursday, spiking the air pollution levels and prompting authorities to suspend civil construction works in Delhi and Haryana. It also affected flight services at the Chandigarh airport.

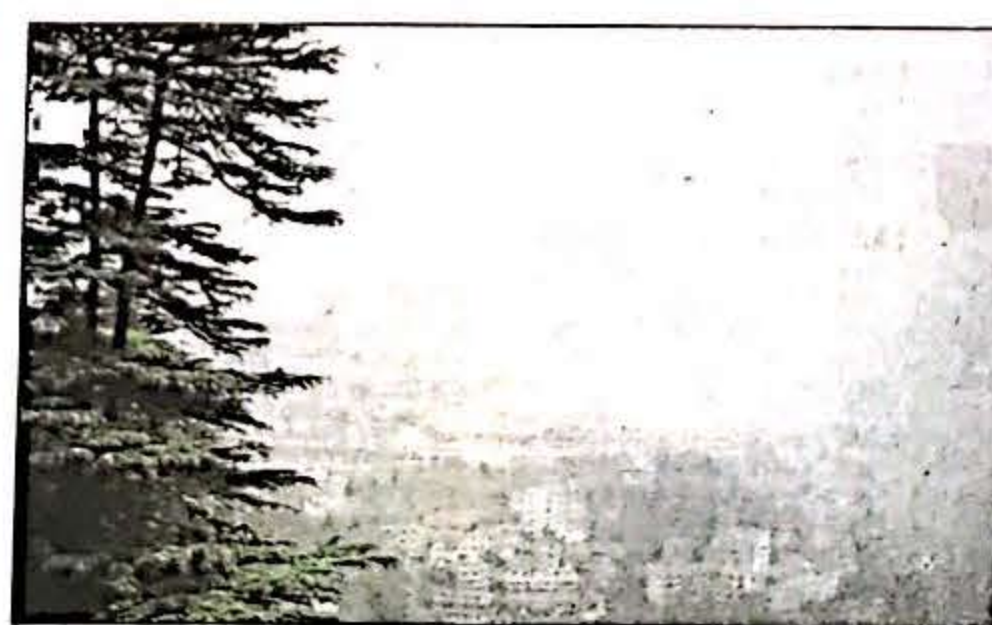
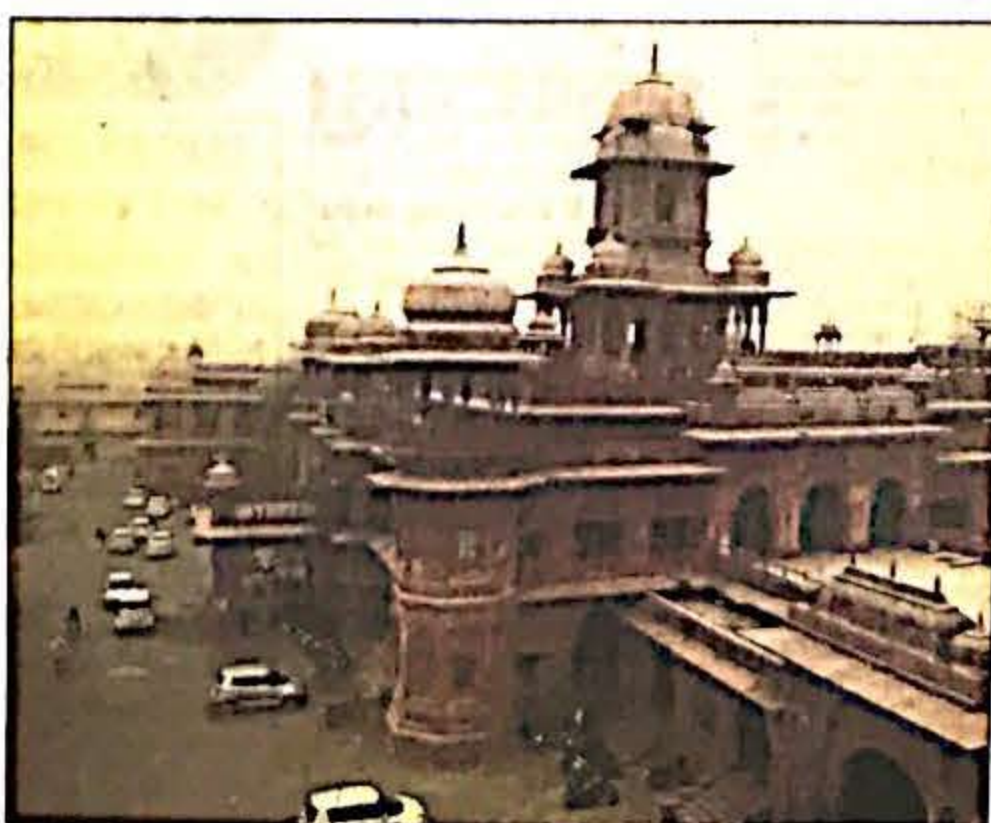
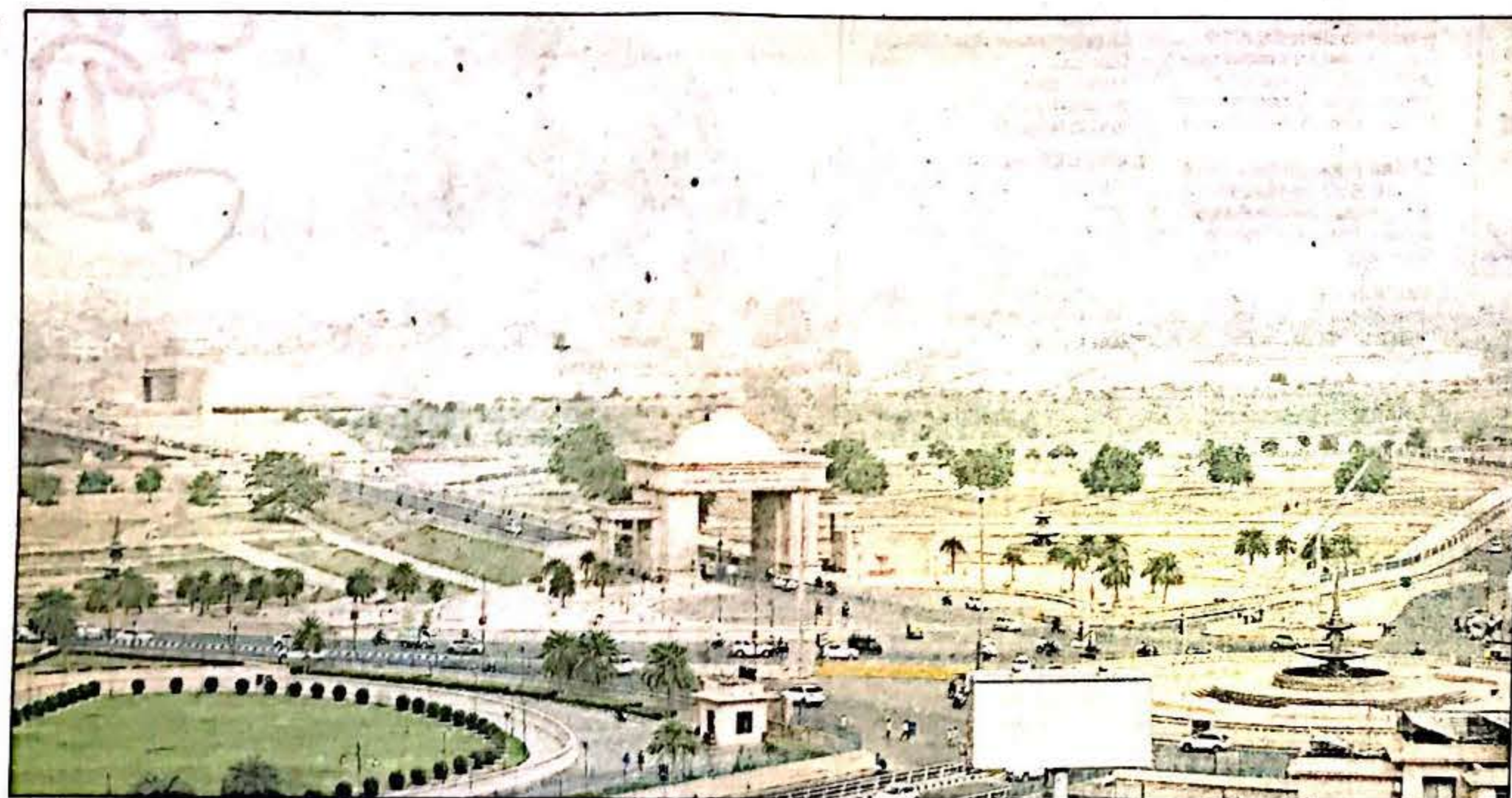
In Uttar Pradesh, dust and thunder storms hit various parts, leaving 15 people dead and 28 injured since Wednesday. According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) data, the air quality deteriorated because of dust storms in western India, particularly Rajasthan.

"Fifteen people were killed in dust storm (since Wednesday). Six died in Sitapur, three each in Gonda and Kaushambi and one each in Faizabad, Hardoi and Chitrakoot," spokesperson of the Uttar Pradesh government said. Besides, 17 people were injured in Sitapur and 11 in Faizabad, he said.

Weather department officials in Delhi said dusty conditions are likely to prevail for another 3-4 days and advised people to avoid staying outdoors for long hours.

Low visibility led to cancellation of all flights to and from Chandigarh International Airport. "No flight landed or took off from Chandigarh (airport) until Thursday afternoon due to bad weather," an official of the Chandigarh International Airport Limited said.

The Haryana State Pollution Control Board (HSPCB) has issued an advisory that no construction activities, hot mix plants and stone crushers to be operated for the next two days. "Delhi and NCR areas and other parts of Haryana have been experiencing a severe air pollution due to dust storm with the PM2.5 value crossing even 500g/m3 and considerably higher PM10 values," stated the HSPCB advisory.



• (Clockwise from top) A view of Lucknow city, engulfed in haze after a dust storm, from Gomti Nagar, Uttar Pradesh, on Thursday afternoon. The hills are obscured by a pall of haze in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh. The court of Bikaner stands in the backdrop of a veil of dust in Rajasthan.

DEEPAK GUPTA/HT; DEEPAK SANSTA/HT; PTI

"A veil of dust spread over the plains of Uttarakhand for the second consecutive day today (Thursday), reducing the harshness of the sun but adding to humidity levels.

Strong winds blowing from Rajasthan and Punjab have brought with them both dust and

moisture, affecting most of north India, including Uttarakhand and western Uttar Pradesh," MeT office director Vikram Singh said in Dehradun.

The Uttar Pradesh government has directed district magistrates of affected areas to ensure proper treatment of those injured

and distribute relief cheques within 24 hours. The Met department has issued warnings of thunderstorm accompanied with squall, dust storm and rain at isolated places over east Uttar Pradesh.

A pall of haze obscured the landscape in hills of Himachal

due to dust storm in adjoining plains, but sharp showers in the evening cleared the mist in Shimla and adjoining areas.

The local Met office has warned of thunderstorm and squall with gusty winds in mid and lower hills from June 15 to 17. (With agency inputs)

Clean air gone with the wind

The entire northern India is covered by an unusual haze caused by dusty winds from the western parts of the country

THE FLOW OF WINDS



CAUSE FOR DUST

Strong westerly winds with a speed of 40-50 km per hour, is bringing in dust from across the western parts of India that have been witnessing extreme "dry" conditions. The winds have been blowing sustainably since Tuesday, accumulating the dust.

WHY THE SPURT

There has been intense heat and dearth of moisture in the north-western parts of India, making the soil dry. The westerly winds blowing close to the surface pick up ground dust and also bring in other ultrafine particles from construction sites, industrial areas and vehicles.

NO MONSOON IMPACT

The phenomenon won't affect the onset of monsoon or pre-monsoon showers, say met department officials. Once the monsoon current picks up speed, cool easterly winds will push the westerly winds away. Relief is expected around June 17.

TEXT: JOYDEEP THAKUR

Changes show air pollution is not just a winter problem

BEYOND THE NEWS

CHETAN CHAUHAN
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The unusually high concentration of particulate matter in the last few days in North India clearly shows that air pollution is not a seasonal problem anymore. As the climate gets warmer and frequency of rains reduces, such spurts in coarse particles making breathing difficult will become a new normal, unless governments wake up to the alarm.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's latest assessment says that planet can bear only up to a 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius increase in temperature from the pre-industrial era levels. The world had already warmed by 0.9 degrees Celsius till 2015 and at the present pace of emissions, climate scientists say, the IPCC mark will get breached latest by 2050.

The Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology has said that both the periodicity and duration of dry spells in the country were rising as the total rainfall events in a year had fallen even though the average rainfall in a year has not changed much, a direct consequence of climate change. The annual average rainfall has remained the same because the frequency of heavy downpours (for example, the June 2013 flash floods in Uttarakhand) has increased in the past two decades.

During dry spells, the earth gets heated up and moisture in the atmosphere dips, creating depressions that pull winds from the oceans. As there is less rain and the green barriers in and around cities have been destroyed, the winds lift dust and local emissions, causing a spurt in air pollution. Such events have been higher in 2018 -- a year of freaky weather that witnessed three killer thunderstorms in May before this dust-laden westerly -- because the average rain-

fall since November 2017 has been about 60% below normal.

The impact could have been substantially reduced had governments -- the states and the Centre -- made air pollution mitigation a round-the-clock exercise, and not restricted it to winter months, when the pollution is high. As a result, most of North India is covered under a veil of dust haze with air pollution worse than that in the winter months.

Blaming only weather conditions would be a colossal mistake.

It is a man-made catastrophe that impacts health of one and all, as half of the air pollution spurt is caused by local dust in the absence of proper roadside landscaping and emissions from industry and vehicles. In the coming years, we can prevent such events by ensuring that every city implements the Centre's dust-management plan, there are restrictions on registration of new fuel-guzzling vehicles, and green dust barriers are developed around cities.