



**EXPLOSIVE LESSONS.** A Filipino boy cries at a hospital after being treated for an injury from a firecracker explosion while celebrating the New Year in Manila, the Philippines. Despite the total ban of some firecrackers, many Filipinos welcome the New Year with fireworks, allegedly to bring them good luck and to drive away evil spirits. (AP Photo/Linus Escandor II)

## Firecrackers leave one dead, 380 injured in Philippines

MANILA, The Philippines (AP) — Philippine officials say firecrackers left at least one man dead, 380 other revellers injured, and caused a fire that gutted 1,000 shanties, despite rains and a government scare campaign.

Health secretary Janet Garin said a drunken man lit a dynamite-like firecracker called “Goodbye Philippines” and embraced it on New Year’s Eve, ripping his jaw and killing him.

Garin said the number of injured, while still alarming, was less than half of last year’s number because of late rains and government warnings that people risked limb amputations if they were injured by oversized firecrackers.

Fire officials also said a rocket lit by revellers set ablaze an abandoned hut and sparked a fire that razed about 1,000 shanties in Manila.

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**BEVY OF BRUSHERS.** Indian school children brush their teeth in an attempt to set a new record for a mass toothbrushing activity, in Bangalore, India. Thousands of students from different schools gathered at the single venue and brushed their teeth at the same time. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)

## Thousands of Indian kids brush teeth in unison for record

BANGALORE, India (AP) — Thousands of Indian children gathered in the southern city of Bangalore to brush their teeth, altogether, in an effort to raise awareness about good oral hygiene.

Dr. Girish Rao from My Dental Plan, a program that organized the event, said the 17,505 kids from 20 schools who participated set a new record for a mass toothbrushing activity.

The two-minute effort was witnessed by an international auditor who is submitting documents to the Guinness Book of World Records.

Rao said in a statement that “the earlier record was by 13,800 children at El Salvador in South American in 1995.”

By Louise Watt  
The Associated Press

**B**EIJING — Environmental authorities in Beijing say air quality improved in 2015, a year in which they issued the city’s first two red smog alerts and showed a greater willingness to disrupt industry and ordinary people in search of cleaner air.

China has been setting national and local targets to reduce its notorious air pollution as citizens have become increasingly aware of the health dangers. Beijing’s municipal government has been replacing coal-fired boilers with natural-gas-powered facilities, forcing older, more polluting vehicles off the road, and closing or moving factories that are heavy polluters.

The city’s average concentration of PM2.5 — small, inhalable particles that can penetrate deep into the lungs and are considered a reliable gauge of air quality — was 81 micrograms per cubic meter in 2015. That was a drop of six percent from 2014, and 10 percent lower than 2013, when Beijing started publishing data on PM2.5.

The “number of days of most serious PM2.5 pollution is falling each year,” the capital’s municipal environmental protection bureau said.

It was, however, still more than twice China’s own standard of 35 micrograms per cubic meter, and eight times higher than an annual mean of 10 that the World Health Organization gives as its guideline for safe air.

Other pollutants also fell, including sulfur dioxide by 38 percent



**SMOG STATUS.** A woman wearing a mask for protection against pollution walks on a pedestrian overhead bridge as office buildings in the Central Business District of Beijing are shrouded with smog. Environmental authorities in Beijing said the Chinese capital’s air quality in 2015 was better than the year before despite the city’s first two red alerts for pollution late in the year. China has been setting national and local targets to reduce its notorious air pollution as citizens have become increasingly aware of the health dangers. (AP Photo/Andy Wong, File)

and nitrogen dioxide by 12 percent. The environmental protection bureau attributed the lowering of sulfur dioxide to the phasing out of coal-fired heating systems.

Beijing’s air gets especially bad in the winter, when the burning of coal for heat in northern China increases and weather patterns add to the smog. Almost half of the worst air days were in the final two months, according to the environmental bureau.

Beijing issued its first two red alerts in December under a two-year-old system. It meant half the city’s vehicles were ordered off the roads on a given day, factory production was restricted, and schools were closed.

In March last year, it lowered the threshold required to trigger a red

alert from a forecast of 72 hours of continuous “severe pollution” — a Chinese air-quality index reading of more than 300 — to “heavy pollution” or a reading of 200. “The earlier the launch, the greater the emissions reductions,” the city government said at the time.

The two red alerts came about because of the lowered threshold and a greater willingness by authorities to issue one, said Ma Jun of the non-governmental Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs in Beijing.

“I think before there had been some reluctance to do it because it’s highly challenging to organize this and it will have a high social and economic cost,” said Ma. “There has been a changing mindset on this.”

## Giant golden statue of Mao demolished in central China

BEIJING (AP) — A Chinese village abruptly demolished a statue of communist China’s founder, Mao Zedong, after images of the structure covered in gold paint and looming 120 feet high over farmland attracted heated discussion on social media.

Although the official reason for the demolition is unknown, with even a high-level Communist Party newspaper struggling to explain the episode, the rise and fall of the Mao monument in central China’s rural Henan province highlights the political sensitivities in the country surrounding a historical figure alternatively revered and criticized by both the public and the government.

The project, reportedly financed by entrepreneurs, cost \$460,000 and was near completion when it was nixed by local officials after images of the statue elicited mixed reactions on Chinese social media, and the story was picked up by domestic and international media.

The *People’s Daily*, the official Communist Party newspaper, said the statue may have lacked approval from cultural management authorities, though it also cited an official as saying that did not appear to be the reason. Local officials could not be reached for comment, and some agencies’ publicly listed telephone numbers appeared to be disconnected.

Since his death in 1976, Mao has been both revered as a founding father and blamed for political turmoil and disastrous economic policies that claimed millions of lives. Successors including Deng Xiaoping, China’s paramount leader during the 1980s, openly rebuked the cult of personality that had been built around Mao and warned cadres about the risk of overly concentrated influence.

Even as China’s current president, Xi Jinping, consolidates power to a degree that has drawn comparisons to Mao, he warned in a 2013 speech against “worshipping” revolutionary leaders without pointing out



**MOMENTARY MAO.** A construction crane rises next to a 120-foot-tall gold-colored statue of former Chinese leader Mao Zedong in Tongxu County in central China’s Henan province, in this January 4, 2016 file photo. A village in central China demolished the statue of Mao after images of the structure covered in gold paint and looming high over farmland attracted heated discussion on social media. (Chinatopix via AP, File)

their mistakes.

Still, Mao, known as the “Great Helmsman,” has kept a firm grip on the imagination for a large swath of the population, particularly the dissatisfied, rural poor, drawing notice of central authorities.

In December, the *Global Times*, a Communist Party tabloid, reported on the latest Mao statue to rise in rural northwestern China, where villagers sang revolutionary songs in a quasi-religious ceremony that featured “ecstatic dance” and a shamanistic figure brandishing a sword.

“Building Mao temples is not encouraged by the central government or local authorities,” the article noted.

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