

Parts of India ban daytime cooking as hundreds die of heat

By **Nirmala George and Indrajit Singh**
The Associated Press

PATNA, India — With sizzling temperatures claiming more than 300 lives last month in India, officials said they were banning daytime cooking in some parts of the drought-stricken country in a bid to prevent accidental fires that have killed nearly 80 more people.

The eastern state of Bihar took the unprecedented step of forbidding any cooking between 9:00am and 6:00pm, after accidental fires exacerbated by dry, hot, and windy weather swept through shantytowns and thatched-roof houses in villages and killed 79 people. This includes 10 children and five adults killed in a fire sparked during a Hindu prayer ceremony in Bihar's Aurangabad district.

People were instead told to cook at night.

Hoping to prevent more fires, officials have also barred burning spent crops or holding religious fire rituals. Anyone defying the ban risks up to a year in jail.

"We call this the fire season in Bihar," Vyas, a state disaster-management official who goes by one name, said. "Strong, westerly winds stoke fires which spread easily and cause great damage."

Much of India is reeling under a weeks-long heat wave and severe drought conditions that have decimated crops, killed livestock, and left at least 330 million Indians without enough water for their daily needs.

Rivers, lakes, and dams have dried up in parts of the western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, and overall officials say groundwater reservoirs are at just 22 percent capacity.

In some areas, the situation is so bad the government has sent tankers of water for emergency relief. Monsoon rains are still weeks away, expected to start in June.

At least 300 people died of heat-related illness in April, including 110 in the state of Orissa, 137 in Telangana, and another



AP Photo/Rajesh Kumar Singh



AP Photo/Manish Swarup

DANGEROUS DAYS. An Indian worker splashes water on his face while trying to cool himself on a hot summer day in Allahabad, India. Much of India is reeling under a weeks-long heat wave and severe drought conditions that have decimated crops, killed livestock, and left at least 330 million Indians without enough water for their daily needs. Pictured in the bottom photo is an Indian family returning in a battery-operated rickshaw after buying an air cooler from a wholesale market in New Delhi, India.

in search of manual labor, often leaving elderly and young relatives behind in parched villages.

This is the second consecutive year southern India has suffered from a deadly heat wave, after some 2,500 people died in scorching temperatures last year.

Though heat waves are common during Indian summers, authorities have done little to ensure water security or prepare urban populations for the risks.

This year, Orissa's capital of Bhubaneswar and Maharashtra's city of Nagpur joined Gujarat's Ahmedabad in launching a heat wave program to educate people on how to stay cool, provide shelters, and train medical workers on dealing with heat-related illnesses such as sun stroke and dehydration. But most cities and states lack such programs.

More than 150 leading Indian economists, rights activists, and academics expressed their "collective anxiety about the enormous suffering of the rural poor" in an open letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The letter said the official response to the crisis has been "sadly listless, lacking in both urgency and compassion," and urges Modi to restore funding for a government program guaranteeing 100 days of paid work a year for the poor and unemployed.

While the monsoon is not expected until June, weather experts hope there will be brief spells of light rain sooner.

"The effect would last a few days, before temperatures start rising again," Indian Meteorological Department spokesman B. P. Yadav said.

Nirmala George reported from New Delhi.

45 in Andhra Pradesh where temperatures since the start of April have hovered around 111° Fahrenheit (F).

That's about 8°F to 10°F degrees hotter than is normal for April, according to state meteorological official Y.K. Reddy. He predicted the situation would only get worse during May, traditionally the

hottest month in India.

The southern state of Andhra Pradesh is running ads on television and in newspapers urging people to stay indoors during the hottest hours. Construction and farm laborers are advised to seek shade when the sun is directly overhead.

Huge numbers of farmers, meanwhile, have migrated to nearby cities and towns

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