

India's mega Hindu festival begins under cloud of toxic air

By Emily Schmall
The Associated Press

PRAYAGRAJ, India — Thousands of portable toilets line roads constantly swept clean, drinking water flows from newly installed taps, electric substations power a massive tent city, and billboards encourage a “Clean Kumbh,” an extension of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s huge push to improve sanitation across the country.

But the skies over the confluence of sacred rivers in northern India where millions of Hindu priests and pilgrims have come to wash away their sins at the ancient *Kumbh Mela* festival are thick with toxic dust, a sign that government officials are struggling to grapple with the country’s worsening air pollution.

The hazardous air may also hinder the government’s drive to make the Kumbh Mela, or pitcher festival, a global tourism event.

Four sites in India rotate every three years hosting the Kumbh, the world’s largest pilgrimage. The river baths, prayer, meditation and yoga sessions, and other religious rituals are organized by *sadhus*, Hinduism’s holy men, and financially supported with public funds.

Tens of millions throng to the sites for a holy dip, many with little money, few provisions, and nowhere to sleep.

The Indian government has for years provided security and free food and shelter for the poorest pilgrims.

For this year’s Kumbh — though less religiously significant than the Kumbh that happens every 12 years, and still less than the one that occurs every 144 years — the government shelled out an estimated 4.3 billion rupees (\$650 million), hoping to impress India’s largely Hindu population ahead of general elections this year and draw visitors from around the world.

The budget supplied thousands of toilets and urinals, public dormitories, and hundreds of water stations, as well as police, hospitals, 24-hour pharmacies, and fire and ambulance services.



And like elsewhere in India, a person’s comfort is determined by wealth and social standing.

The expansive campgrounds hosted everything from luxury “glamping” options that cost up to 35,000 rupees (\$494) per night — private, tent “suites” with plush bedding and flush toilets — to a cot with a thin foam mattress in a public dormitory in a high-top tent that costs 200 rupees (\$2.83) per night.

“I go to holy sites very often, but I’m used to them being very dirty. I have never seen this level of cleanliness measures at any other holy city,” said Gita Mishra, 58, one of the guests at a public tent near the banks of the river.

When people waiting for a spot outside the tent learned it was full, they laid blankets around the periphery to sleep in the hazy open air.

Still others, including about 500

HAZARDOUS HAZE. A naga sadhu, or a Hindu holy man (top photo), smiles while participating in a procession toward the Sangam, the confluence of the rivers Ganges, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati during the Kumbh Mela festival in Allahabad, India. India’s Hindu nationalist-led government is splurging on the religious megafest, spending unprecedented sums as part of a strategy to focus on the country’s majority Hindu population ahead of a general election this year. In the bottom photo, Hindu devotees arrive to take spiritual-cleansing dips in the Sangam. (AP Photos/Rajesh Kumar Singh)

sanitation workers, pitched pup tents near a row of some of the toilets they are paid 300 rupees (\$7) per day to clean.

The production of any Kumbh is a gargantuan task, particularly in the low-lying Indian army parade grounds in Prayagraj where the ritual baths take place. Regular summertime floods leave organizers only 40 to 50 days to erect the temporary city, according to city commissioner Ashish Goel.

But this year’s public provisions are unprecedented.

“It’s a very aspirational Kumbh Mela,” Goel said.

The dust plumes encompassing the camp come from the sandy riverbanks, Goel said, and not from construction, which is banned during the 55-day festival. Still, in the city center outside the fairgrounds, brick kilns send up clouds of PM 2.5, tiny particulate matter that can dangerously clog lungs.

India’s cities are among the world’s smoggiest.

The Indian government has announced a five-year program to cut air pollution by up to 30 percent from 2017 levels in the country’s 102 worst-affected cities, including Prayagraj.

Key targets include reducing burning of field waste, firewood, and charcoal; cleaning up thermal power and auto emissions and heavily polluting brick production; and controlling dust from construction.

Critics say the plan lacks details on enforcement and funding.

Associated Press videojournalist Rishabh R. Jain contributed to this report.

Waning iPhone demand highlights Chinese consumer anxiety

Continued from page 2

car or making other major purchases. “People are worried about losing jobs,” she said.

Weakness in Chinese demand is especially painful for Apple and other smartphone makers. China accounts for one-third of the industry’s global handset shipments.

Shipments in China fell 10 percent from a year earlier to 103 million handsets in the quarter ending in September, according to research firm IDC. It expects last year’s total Chinese purchases to shrink by eight or nine percent compared with 2016.

The belt-tightening in the world’s second-largest economy is bedeviling global industries, including autos and designer clothing, that count on China to drive sales growth.

The trade war with Washington has shaken a “sense of China’s invincibility,” said Mark Natkin, managing director of Marbridge Consulting, a research firm in Beijing. Chinese are waking up to the fact that their economy is vulnerable to the uncertainties of the global economy, he said.

The slump is a setback for the ruling Communist Party’s efforts to nurture self-sustaining, consumer-driven economic growth and wean China from its reliance on exports and investment.

China’s third-quarter economic growth of 6.5 percent was stronger than most other major economies, but the country’s lowest since the 2008 global crisis. The



deceleration partly reflects a deliberate government campaign to rein in China’s high debt levels. At the same time, Beijing has sought to relieve the economic pain with higher government spending.

“They’re trying to aim at a very fine target,” said Dollar, a former World Bank and U.S. Treasury Department official. “They want to see the economy slow down, but they don’t want to see it slow down too much.”

China reported that factory activity shrank in December for the first time in more than two years. And auto sales in the biggest global market are on track for their first annual decline in three decades after plunging 16 percent in November. Soft real estate sales have forced developers to

cut prices.

Overall, export growth decelerated to 5.4 percent over a year earlier, less than half of October’s 12.6 percent rate.

Sales to the U.S. market have held up despite U.S. President Donald Trump’s punitive tariffs on \$250 billion of Chinese goods, rising 12.9 percent in November over a year earlier. But that was thanks partly to exporters rushing to beat further American duty increases — a trend that is starting to fade.

Apple’s setback also highlights another challenge: increasingly capable Chinese competitors whose products cost less.

In smartphones, that includes Huawei, Oppo, Vivo, and Xiaomi. Some are priced as low as 500 yuan (\$70). Others have

ISLUMP. A trade-in-for-an-iPhone XR promotion board is displayed while an Apple employee waits for customers at a retail store in Beijing. Apple Inc.’s \$1,000 iPhone is a tough sell to Chinese consumers who are jittery over an economic slump and a trade war with Washington. The tech giant became the latest global company to collide with Chinese consumer anxiety when CEO Tim Cook said iPhone demand is waning, due mostly to China. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

beaten the American giant to market with features Chinese users want, such as phones that can use separate carriers for voice and data.

That has eroded the iPhone’s cachet and customers’ willingness to pay premium prices.

“I think 10,000 yuan (\$1,400) for an iPhone is too much,” said Vivian Yang, a manager at a Beijing technology company. “Nobody needs such a phone.”

Yuan Yuan, a 26-year-old employee of a social-media company in Beijing, reflects the pressures on urban professionals squeezed by rising living costs and job uncertainty.

Yuan said his monthly income fluctuates between 3,000 and 10,000 yuan (\$425 and \$1,400) and only covers living expenses.

As a university student, Yuan had an iPhone paid for by his parents. But once he had to buy his own, he switched to a lower-priced Xiaomi.

“I have no plans to buy an apartment, a car, or any other major items,” Yuan said.

AP researcher Yu Bing in Beijing, AP Markets writer Marley Jay in New York, and AP Economics writers Paul Wiseman and Josh Boak in Washington contributed to this report.