Hospitals drown in cracker noise

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Calcutta: The city witnessed one of its most polluted Kali Puja and Diwali celebrations in recent years, with firecrackers being burst with impunity till early Monday, making a mockery of the official 8-10pm window for bursting green crackers on Sunday.

A team from green platform Sabuj Mancha surveyed the city, focusing on hospital areas, and found noise and air pollution norms being routinely flouted both inside and outside hospital premises. Firecrackers are banned within 300 metres of hospitals, which are designated silent zones, according to a government order.

Metro accompanied the team and witnessed the violations as they unfolded.

8.15pm: BC Roy hospital, Phoolbagan

A large contingent of police personnel was stationed near the hospital entrance. Yet, the eastern and western fringes of the hospital witnessed high-decibel fireworks.

"Forget 300m, fireworks are being burst barely 30m from the hospital walls," said Naba Dutta, secretary of Sabuj Mancha.

"We have been hearing deafening sounds since 7pm, and occasionally, remnants of crackers are landing near us," said a person sitting near the main block.

The ambient noise level was 71.3 decibels against the permissible limit of 50, with peaks of 96.4 decibels, said environment analyst Sudipta Bhattacharya. An increase of 10 decibels means a doubling of perceived loudness.

The PM2.5 level, meanwhile, stood at 340 micrograms per cubic metre of air — more than 5.5 times the national standard of 60 micrograms and nearly 13 times the World Health Organisation's guideline of 15 micrograms.

9pm: RG Kar hospital, Shyambazar

A group of medical students were bursting fireworks inside the hospital premises, in blatant violation of the norms.

"The students fled when we reached the spot, but we found a large number of burnt crackers and other tell-tale signs of fireworks being burst in the area," said a Sabuj Mancha representative.

The ambient noise level, measured in front of the entrance to a critical care unit, was 77.3 decibels, with the maximum touching 94.7. The PM2.5 level was nearly six times the national permissible limit.

10.30pm: Sishu Mangal, Hazra

At Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan, near the Sarat Bose Road-Hazra Road crossing, the ambient noise level was 70.1 decibels against the permissible limit of 40 for silent zones after 10pm. The peak touched 92.8 decibels.

"The PM2.5 level here was 413 micrograms per cubic metre, nearly seven times the national limit," said Bhattacharya.

"A bomb seemed to be bursting every second. The violations appeared to be far greater than in previous years. Patients are particularly vulnerable and must be protected at any cost," said Dulal Bose, an ENT specialist, former sheriff and president of Sabuj Mancha.

"The Supreme Court-directed time window is over, but the violations seem to be increasing," Dutta said.

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"When fireworks are being burst from every rooftop, there is little we can do," said an officer at Tollygunge police station.

11.30pm: MR Bangur Hospital, Tollygunge

Hospital staff and their family members were bursting various kinds of fireworks, including rockets, around midnight.

"We found large numbers of burnt crackers, while rockets were being launched one after another," said Bose. The noise and air pollution levels were comparable to those at Seva Pratishthan, he added.

Official record

The state pollution control board (PCB) received 57 complaints over the night, 37 of them after 10pm, reflecting the surge in violations beyond the permitted window. Sabuj Mancha received 24 complaints from across the city, most of them after 10pm.

Central PCB data also showed a sharp deterioration in air quality across the city after 10pm.

"The AQI in Ballygunge was 100, in the satisfactory category, at 10pm. It rose to above 400, in the severe category, around midnight. The trend was similar across all seven automatic air quality monitoring stations in the city. PM2.5 was the main cause," said a Sabuj Mancha expert.

"What somewhat saved us was the availability of some wind. Otherwise, the situation in the city could have been far more disastrous," said a government official.