

Over 1,100 killed by heat wave in Pakistan

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According to official statistics, more than 1,100 people have died in a heat wave in Pakistan's Sindh province that produced the highest reported temperatures since 1979, as high as 45 degrees Celsius or 113 degrees Fahrenheit. The casualties are mostly poor, victims of the crumbling state of infrastructure and public services.

“By Friday, at least 1,150 people have died in the government-run hospitals, Anwar Kazmi of the Edhi Foundation, a private charity that runs a network of ambulances and morgues, told Reuters.

Hundreds of deaths caused by heatstroke, dehydration or low blood pressure were reported every day last week—136 on Sunday, 304 on Monday, 337 on Tuesday, 229 on Wednesday and 105 on Thursday. The vast majority—1,040 deaths—were reported from Karachi, Pakistan's financial hub and the capital of Sindh, which has a population of 20 million.

The fatalities are mostly in the city's poor neighbourhoods. Apart from those who died, staggering numbers of people have suffered ill-health—42,000 in Sindh province and 38,000 in Karachi alone. The city's only morgue, with a capacity of 200, has been overwhelmed, forcing the burial of at least 350 unidentified or unclaimed bodies.

Pakistan's previous deadliest heat wave was in 1991, when 523 people died, EM-DAT, the International Disaster Database, reported.

This week's massive toll once again demonstrates the utter negligence on the part of successive governments toward workers and the toiling masses. Despite the horrendous number of deaths reported every day, the provincial and federal governments have done next to nothing. Overwhelmed hospitals and other health centres, run down by budget cuts over decades, were forced to appeal to the public to donate stretchers, ice, water and other supplies as well as for volunteers to provide facilities for an unending stream of patients.

“People are donating generously. They have given us everything from bottled water to medicines, for the patients,” a hospital official told the *Dawn*, adding that “government officials and political leaders have visited patients largely for photo shoots.”

Heat waves in Pakistan and the region are not unusual. More than 2,000 people died in India just last month. The extreme situation in Karachi was caused by a low-pressure weather system over the Arabian Sea that prevented sea breezes flowing onshore, according to Ghulam Rasul, the head of Pakistan's meteorological department.

A former head of the Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency, Asif Shuja, told the *Express Tribune*: “Pakistan lacks the technology to predict extreme weather events.”

While failing to invest in such technology, successive governments have allocated huge amounts of money for military spending, revealing the Pakistani elite's preoccupation with its reactionary geo-political interests, not the fate of the vast majority of the country's people. Defence expenditure is set to consume 19 percent of the total government budget in the coming financial year.

While the heat wave was severe, the death toll was due to the poor living standards imposed on the population and the lack of any government preparations to face natural disasters, whether heat, floods or earthquakes. This stands as an indictment of the country's governments. Half or more of country's people live in poverty and Karachi is a centre of urban poverty. The poor in the city and elsewhere in the province lack proper supplies of water and electricity, which are crucial in such hot weather.

In Karachi, power outages overwhelmingly fall on the poor neighbourhoods, rather than their affluent counterparts, and last as long as 14 hours a day. The outages also severely affect the water supply.

Shabana Majeed from a largely poor area of Karachi related her experience to Reuters. Her husband, 59, died Monday. “Failing to find an ambulance, we hired a cab and took him to the hospital,” she said. “It was already packed with heatstroke patients and when a doctor came to see him after 30 to 40 minutes, he was pronounced dead.”

“We pay all our utility bills on time but get water shortages and prolonged hours of load-shedding in return. People should stand up against the corrupt and inept government,” Majeed said, giving voice to the growing anger among the masses.

Protests over water shortages and load shedding erupted throughout Karachi against the government and the K-Electric company, which supplies electricity to the city. Over the past decade, the worsening power shortages have led to numerous mass protests, including in Karachi.

The government responded by declaring a state of emergency on Tuesday, cancelling the leave of medical staff and workers in other critical services, including graveyards, in an attempt to deflect criticism.

In a further indication of the ruling elite’s cynical indifference toward the fate of working people and the poor, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s federal Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) government and the provincial government led by the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) blamed each other.

Water and Power Minister Khawaja Asif, who is also the defence minister, told the federal parliament: “The basic responsibility of the Karachi deaths lies with the Sindh government.” Denying any federal government responsibility, he continued: “If there are problems in hospitals, it’s the responsibility of the provincial health department to tackle them.”

Attempting to divert the widespread anger in the direction of the provincial government, Asif declared: “Doing dharnas [protests] and asking for my resignation will not solve anything; the provincial government also needs to fulfill their responsibilities.”

In return, the PPP-led Sindh government blamed the federal government for the water shortage and load shedding.

The most revealing expression of the federal government’s indifference was an attempt to wipe its hands of any responsibility for the power crisis in Karachi on the basis that K-Electric is privately run and

an agreement to provide the company with electricity from the national grid had expired. “Right now we have no legal obligation to give them [K-Electric] electricity,” Asif declared, “but we do give it to them, 650 megawatts of it.”

Prime Minister Sharif’s PML-N government is executing a rapid privatisation program, in collaboration with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The energy sector is one of the main components, targeting the Water and Power Development Authority. The government is essentially extending the program of its predecessors, which privatised the state-owned Karachi Electric Supply Company in 2005 to become K-Electric.

Since the privatisation, K-Electric has drastically reduced its generation capacity in order to maximise profits. The PML-N government allowed K-Electric to increase its tariff by 70 percent in April 2014 as part of its program to end subsidies. It is seeking to make the sector profitable, eyeing its total privatisation.



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