Over 150 people die in oil tanker explosion in Pakistan

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About 157 people including men, women and children were killed when an overturned petrol tanker exploded on a road in the Bahawalpur district of the southern Punjab in Pakistan on June 24. At least 20 children were among the dead.

The death toll could rise as more than a hundred injured, about 40 critically, are being treated in hospitals. The hospitals, including the Bahawalpur's Victoria Hospital in South Punjab and others in Multan, are poorly equipped.

The tanker was carrying 40,000 litres of fuel when it overturned after bursting a tyre, while travelling to Lahore on a major highway. When news spread of petrol spilling from the tanker, hundreds of residents from the nearby village of Ramzanpur rushed to the scene with buckets and other containers. Motorcyclists and other vehicles also stopped to collect fuel, which is costly in Pakistan.

"After about 10 minutes the tanker exploded in a huge fireball and enveloped people collecting petrol. It was not clear how the fire started," regional police chief Raja Riffat told the media.

Video footage and photos from the site show charred bodies and the wreckage of motorcycles and cars, along with kitchen utensils, pots, cans and buckets that were brought to the site to collect petrol.

Nahid Ahmed, a doctor at the Nishter hospital in Multan told the *Dawn* that more than 50 severely-burned victims were being treated. Rizwan Naseer, director of Punjab provincial rescue services, explained that many of the bodies were burnt beyond recognition and required DNA testing to identify the dead.

Abdul Malik, a local police officer who was reportedly among the first to arrive on the scene, told Associated Press that he had "never seen anything like it in my life. Victims trapped in the fireball. They were screaming for help. When the fire finally died down we saw bodies everywhere, so many were just skeletons."

Khalil Ahmed, a 57-year-old former government employee who lives in the village of Ramzan Joya, told Reuters that he had lost 12 relatives in the fire, saying "one body has been recovered and 11 others are still missing."

Ahmed explained: "After the spill, people began calling their relatives to come and gather the oil, and some showed up from a nearby village as well. There must have been 500 people gathered when the fire began."

The *New York Times* noted: "Fuel is a high-value commodity in Pakistan, so even for those aware of the risks, the prospect of obtaining it free was too powerful a lure to ignore. Ahmedpur East [the small city near the disaster] has long suffered from poverty, illiteracy and a lack of modern facilities, and local residents have blamed the provincial government for spending money on urban areas at the expense of rural regions."

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif cut short his private visit to Britain and went to Bahawalpur to meet with the victims of the inferno and the relatives of the deceased. In an exercise in political damage control, Sharif expressed his "sympathy" for the victims and announced compensation of 2 million rupees (about $US19,000) for the families of each of the dead and 1 million rupees for the injured. Shehbaz Sharif, the prime minister's brother and chief minister of Punjab, also took part.

Nawaz Sharif, in an attempt to deflect mounting anger, announced that, "a proper inquiry will be held to determine whether the oil tanker was fit to be on the road and whether all stakeholders did what they were supposed to do. Such incidents should be made an example of so they can be avoided in the future."

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His brother told a press conference that the tragedy was a “result of poverty as locals, with no education and desperate for food, were collecting petrol to feed their stomachs.” He added: “This is the result of the endemic corruption prevalent in the country.”

Such statements are utterly cynical. The prime minister and his brother are political representatives of the Pakistani elite who are responsible for the utter neglect in South Punjab and widespread poverty throughout Pakistan. According to a World Bank survey, more than 60 percent of the population survives on less than $3 a day.

South Punjab is among the areas worst affected by poverty along with Balochistan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and Sind. All four districts in South Punjab are poverty stricken—the poverty rate in Muzaffargarh is 64.8 percent and in Rajanpur 64 percent, followed by DG Khan 63.7 percent and Bahawalpur 53 percent.

In its June 26 editorial entitled “Darkened by death,” *News International* wrote that the Bahawalpur tragedy “speaks to the state of human deprivation in Pakistan today” and “can be seen as a continuation of the precariousness of the lives of the destitute in Pakistan.”

The editorial continued: “This incident is not about blaming one institution or another, but goes much deeper to the socio-economic structure of our society and is a product of decades of collective failure on the part of our leadership.” It noted: “The victims could not receive the specialist treatment they needed because there isn’t a single burn unit in Bahawalpur’s hospitals. Southern Punjab’s only burn unit is located in Multan.”

Similarly, the *Dawn’s* editorial declared: “How many of the injured could have been saved had better emergency services been available at the site of the incident and in nearby hospitals will perhaps never be known.” It went on to say: “The chain of flaws—from highways with inadequate safety resources to medical services that were quickly overwhelmed—is a failure of government,”

The tragedy certainly represents “a failure of government” and the “socio-economic structure” it defends—namely capitalism. However, the gnashing of teeth by editorial writers along with the perfunctory comments of the prime minister and his brother are part of a well-rehearsed performance which is above all aimed at deflecting public anger. The official inquiry will be a whitewash in which none of the fundamental causes of the disaster will be addressed, let alone rectified.

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