

# At least 21 children die in an Indian hospital as oxygen supplies run out

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At least 70 children, some newborn, died at the state-run Baba Raghav Das Medical College Hospital (BRD) in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh within 10 days, from August 5 to 15. A major contributing factor was the lack of oxygen supplies on August 10–11 after a private supplier withdrew its equipment over outstanding hospital payments.

According to the Press Trust of India (PTI) on August 11, a national home ministry spokesperson stated: “21 children died due to shortage of supply of liquid oxygen in BRD Medical College, in the last 36 hours. Senior officers are on the spot. The exact cause is being verified by civil administration.”

As oxygen supplies ran out, desperate parents used pumps to force air into the lungs of their dying children, according to the *Guardian*. The newspaper noted that many parents “scoured the city for blood, syringes and other basic supplies that the facility lacked. They begged medical staff for help. Some said police hustled them from the wards after their children died.”

One father, Mohammad Zahid, 34, explained how he and his 17-year-old nephew worked themselves to exhaustion attempting to pump air into the lungs of Khushi, his five-year-old daughter. The girl had been taken to hospital with a high fever from encephalitis. Despite their efforts, Khushi ultimately perished.

“They [the doctors] told us to keep pressing to make sure my daughter keeps breathing,” Zahid told the AFP. Zahid rejected official denials that the lack of oxygen supplies played a major factor in the deaths. “How can they say that a supply disruption did not have a role in the deaths?” he asked. “My daughter could still move her body till the oxygen supply stopped. Her condition deteriorated as we used those manual pumps.”

The BRD Medical College reported the deaths of 34

infants at the neonatal intensive care unit on August 14-15. Encephalitis contracted from mosquito bites caused 12 of the deaths. Encephalitis claims hundreds of lives every year in India, especially during the monsoon season.

The children’s deaths have provoked widespread anger within the Indian working class. All the efforts by state and federal government ministers and officials have been geared toward distorting the basic facts. They claim that various natural factors, like acute encephalitis syndrome, were to blame for the deaths.

The PTI report noted that a state government official release in Lucknow “rubbished” the reports about non-availability of oxygen at the hospital. Uttar Pradesh Health Minister Siddharth Nath Singh said the deaths were “very unfortunate,” saying the government would set up an “inquiry committee to ascertain if any lapses have been there” and “if anyone is found guilty he will be made accountable.”

Official denials that the lack of oxygen supplies caused the deaths, and a well-established history of fruitless previous “committees,” point to a cover up of the government’s own criminal negligence.

In his Independence Day speech this week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attempted to divert the rising anger, referring only to the tragedy in which “our innocent children died.” He “assured” the Indian people that the case would be dealt with the “utmost sensitivity for the betterment and security of people.”

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath represents Gorakhpur district where the hospital is sited. He made empty promises about “eradicating encephalitis” and making the state “encephalitis-free in the coming years.” He expressed “regret” over the children’s deaths, after earlier declaring that the “guilty would not be spared.”

All of this is to divert attention from the failure of the oxygen supplies.

According to the *Washington Post*, the hospital owed \$US89,750 to a Lucknow-based medical supply company, Pushpa Sales Private Limited, which had written to the hospital and district magistrate for six months demanding payment. The company asserted that the hospital violated the terms of its contract by running a balance of more than \$15,625. The agreement expired July 31 and the company discontinued the oxygen supply on August 4.

India's NDTV noted that on the morning of August 10 employees at the storage plant from which oxygen is piped to the hospital, warned officials that the stock of liquid oxygen was limited and would last only until that evening. At around 11:30 pm the oxygen ran out, leaving 800 beds without oxygen for two hours until fresh cylinders were brought in.

While hospital officials said no death was reported at that time, NDTV noted that 23 children died on August 10 at the hospital, 14 of them in the neonatal ward where premature newborns are kept.

While the state government and its ministers claimed they were not informed about alleged irregularities in the BRD hospital, the *Hindu* obtained documents showing that Medical Education Minister Ashtosh Tendon had, in fact, been informed before the disaster.

The *Deccan Herald* reported that on August 14, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) sought a report from the Uttar Pradesh government on the deaths of children in Gorakhpur. The NHRC statement said: "The reported deaths, in such a large number in a government-run hospital, amount to serious violation of the right to life and health of the innocent victims. This indicates gross callousness on part of the hospital administration and the Medical Education and Health Department of the government of Uttar Pradesh."

According to the article, Japanese Encephalitis and Acute Encephalitis Syndrome have killed over 50,000 people in eastern Uttar Pradesh, mostly in the Gorakhpur district, in the past three decades. It further noted that 124 deaths were reported in the BRD hospital this year through to August 8, while 641 children died from encephalitis at the hospital last year and 491 died in 2015.

The *Guardian* said patients continued to stream into the hospital over the weekend. Quoting hospital

records, it pointed out that 450 patients with encephalitis were admitted on Saturday alone, of whom 200 were children under 12. "Many were being treated on the floor and near toilets due to a shortage of beds," the newspaper reported.

According to India's rich list, published by *Forbes*, 18 of the wealthiest people in India have built their fortunes, totalling \$59.27 billion, through pharmaceuticals and healthcare. They include the second richest person, Dilip Shagvi, whose wealth is estimated at \$16.9 billion.

High quality health care, however, is not available to most people. While Modi boasts that India is the world's fastest growing economy, government expenditure on public health is about 1 percent of gross domestic product, among the lowest in the world.



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