

Egyptian hospitals run out of oxygen, killing COVID-19 patients in ICU wards

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Video clips of the chaotic and tragic scenes in intensive care units (ICU) treating COVID-19 patients that ran out of oxygen supplies have provoked shock and outrage throughout Egypt.

On Saturday, video shot by a distressed visitor at the Zefta general hospital in the Gharbiya governorate, north east of the capital Cairo, captured the terrible scene in a ward where the oxygen had run out. It showed a woman running up and down the aisles shouting, “I will expose you everywhere... You filthy government!”, and filming rooms showing patients struggling on their beds and members of the medical team collapsed on the floor.

Abdel Nasser Hemida, undersecretary in Gharbiya’s health ministry, denied that oxygen supplies had run out.

Just hours later, Ahmed Mamdouh filmed the scene at an ICU in the el-Husseiniya hospital, in al-Sharqia governorate, northeast of Cairo. He was at the hospital visiting his aunt when the patients—including his aunt—died after the oxygen level fell below two percent, leaving neither enough pressure nor sufficient oxygen to save the patients’ lives.

The clip shows patients struggling to breathe, people screaming and medical staff desperately trying to save patients. Mamdouh is heard saying, “Everyone in the ICU has died... there’s no oxygen.”

The image of one nurse, collapsed on the floor in a corner with the fear in her eyes visible through a visor and mask is heart breaking. It has become a nationwide scandal. One social media user tweeted, “No one should experience that!” Another tweeted, “The situation in Egypt is getting worse. Help us.” Many offered their support for the nurse, urging her not to give up. Other spoke of fears for their own safety.

According to *Egypt Watch*, problems with oxygen supplies in public hospitals are a frequent occurrence, exacerbated by the pandemic and the health ministry’s lack of preparations, with doctors crying out for medical

supplies, including oxygen. Egyptian footballer Mohamed Salah, who plays for Liverpool FC in the UK, has donated an oxygen tank to the Basyoun Central Hospital “to support coronavirus patients’ treatment” in his hometown of Nagrig, in Gharbiya governorate.

The manager of Hamool Hospital in Kafr Al-Sheikh, in the Nile Delta, made an appeal on Facebook for oxygen cylinders, only to be referred for investigation by the authorities. This is the government’s standard response to medical professionals who dare to speak out against the disastrous state of the country’s healthcare system or criticize the government’s handling of the pandemic.

The government’s immediate response was to deny that the deaths were caused by the failure of the oxygen supply, with Health Minister Hala Zayed declaring that there were “sufficient medical oxygen supplies at all hospitals receiving coronavirus patients” and accusing the banned Muslim Brotherhood of spreading “rumours.”

Mamdouh Ghorab, governor of Sharqia, maintained they had died “naturally” due to chronic illnesses and not as a result of an oxygen shortage. The claim was rebutted by local legislator Sayed Rahmo who said, “The patients died as a result of negligence at the al-Husseiniya hospital and the mismanagement of the oxygen shortage crisis.” He added, “According to my sources, the intensive care doctor informed the hospital director about the shortage of oxygen supply at least an hour [before the catastrophe],” but the warning was not heeded.

Ahmed Mamdouh was reportedly arrested after Dr Mamdouh Gorab, governor of Al-Sharqia, ordered the security forces to arrest those who had filmed the incident. There were reports that the nurse was fined for “not working during hard times.”

The COVID-19 pandemic is again on the rampage after the lifting of the initial lockdown. While Egypt has officially recorded 145,000 cases and nearly 8,000 deaths, these figures are a gross underestimate in this densely

populated country of 98 million people. Rick Brennan, director of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Health Emergencies Programme for the Eastern Mediterranean, dismissed these figures as only an estimate since the government's testing programme focused only on those with severe symptoms.

According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics, Egypt's official statistics organisation, there were 60,000 overall deaths between May and July last year, the peak months of the first wave of COVID-19, far more than the average death rate in the corresponding period in previous years. On December 21, Mohamed al-Nady, a member of the Ministry of Health and Population's scientific committee, estimated that the real number of infections was 10 times higher than official figures.

The surge in cases has overwhelmed Egypt's chronically under-resourced public hospitals, which even under normal conditions are unable to cope. The shortage of hospitals has led to many people in need of treatment being turned away and medical supplies running out, with a recent report revealing the healthcare system at the point of collapse. Others are forced to turn to the private sector, if they have the money or connections to secure a bed.

Egypt has some of the highest numbers of COVID-19 deaths among health workers in the world. Although the government does not collect statistics, the Egyptian Medical Syndicate has reported that more than 282 medical professionals have died from the disease, including 18 this year alone. Hundreds more are ill.

The blood-soaked regime of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has imprisoned more than 60,000 political activists and critics, including secular and Muslim Brotherhood politicians, journalists and human rights defenders, and more than 1,000 doctors and health-care professionals are in Egypt's notoriously overcrowded and squalid prisons, where they are often detained for years without trial.

Human Rights Watch says at least six doctors and pharmacists are still in jail for raising concerns over the lack of proper testing and personal protective equipment for healthcare workers. They are accused of "spreading false news", "misusing social media" and "joining an unlawful organization."

The government has imprisoned or expelled journalists who criticize it, forcing Reuters correspondent and *Guardian* journalist Ruth Michaelson to leave the country for citing a scientific study stating Egypt had more coronavirus cases than officially confirmed.

There is mounting anger over the delay in the

government's immunisation programme that was set to start last month. It is trying to secure 20 million doses of the vaccine through COVAX, the international initiative, as well as millions of doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, while Russia has agreed to supply Egypt with 25 million doses of its Sputnik-V vaccine. At best, this is only enough to cover just under a quarter of the population.

El-Sisi, like his counterparts across the globe, has refused to do anything that would impact on the major corporations' ability to make profits, instead announcing a series of measures aimed at curtailing freedom of movement and social behaviour.

The collapse of Egypt's hospital system takes place amid an acute economic and social crisis gripping the country. The economic crisis has been exacerbated by the limited lockdown instituted by the regime to control the pandemic, which has been accompanied by little governmental financial support for the masses who lost their means to make a living, plunging millions into destitution.

The explosive social tensions and the economic crisis wracking Egypt are part of the broader breakdown of bourgeois capitalist rule across the Middle East and Africa. The historic crisis of the capitalist system and its complete failure to address the social catastrophe afflicting the masses makes it clear that only the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective, can lead the fight for social equality and democratic rights.



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