

Fire at COVID-19 hospital in Baghdad kills at least 82 people

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After an accident caused an oxygen tank to explode, eyewitness accounts and video clips of the terrible scenes of the fire at the hospital treating COVID-19 patients have provoked shock and anger throughout Iraq. A hashtag demanding Health Minister Hassan al-Tamimi be sacked was soon trending on Twitter.

Saturday's fire at the Ibn Khatib hospital, an intensive care facility dedicated to COVID-19 patients in the Diyala Bridge neighbourhood, one of Baghdad's poorer districts in the southeast of the city, has killed at least 82 people and injured 110. At least 28 patients with severe symptoms of the virus who were on ventilators were among the dead.

This tragedy is but the latest horrific example of the devastating impact of decades of sanctions, illegal invasions, occupations and the deliberate stoking of a sectarian civil war orchestrated and led by successive US administrations that have reduced a once prosperous country, with one of the most advanced health and social infrastructures in the Arab world, to utter poverty and degradation.

To this day, Iraq suffers from political violence, kidnappings and extortion at the hands of numerous militias, while accidents resulting from neglect and decrepit infrastructure have compounded the plight of the Iraqi people. In 2019, to cite but one example, at least 90 people drowned when an overloaded ferry carrying families on an outing sank in the Tigris River in the northern city of Mosul.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has described the consequences of Washington's onslaught on the Iraqi people as "sociocide," the deliberate destruction of the entire infrastructure of a modern civilization (See: The US war and occupation of Iraq—the murder of a society).

The blaze spread rapidly because without smoke

detectors, sprinkler system or fire hoses, "the hospital had no fire protection system, and false ceilings allowed the flames to spread to highly flammable products," said Maj. Gen. Khadim Bohan, the head of Iraq's civil defence forces. He told the state-run Iraqiya TV, "If there had been smoke detectors, the situation would have been totally different."

Officials said that some of the victims were older patients on ventilators who could not move from their beds when the fire started. Reuters news agency quoted an eyewitness as saying that patients and medical workers had jumped out of second-story windows to escape the flames.

One eyewitness, who was visiting his brother when the fire broke out, said people were jumping out of the windows as the flames spread throughout the COVID-19 unit. "In the beginning, there was an explosion. ... The fire spread, like fuel. ... The smoke reached my brother. My brother is sick. I took my brother out to the street, next to the checkpoint. Then I came (back) and went up from there to the last floor, that did not burn. I found a girl suffocating, about 19 years old, she was suffocating, she was about to die," said Ahmed Zaki. He added, "I took her on my shoulders, and I ran down. People were jumping. ... Doctors fell on the cars. Everyone was jumping. And I kept going up from there, got people and came down again."

The fire has been widely attributed to negligence and Iraq's rampant corruption, with Ali al-Bayati, a member of the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, holding the health ministry responsible for the blaze and accusing it of failing to cooperate with investigators. He told the Middle East Eye website, "I think the responsibility of the incident is on the Ministry of Health, as we have evidence that most

hospitals have no occupational safety or firefighting facilities, and it is not the first case in such an institution.” He added, the fire was “a crime against patients exhausted by Covid-19 who put their lives in the hands of the health ministry and its institutions and instead of being treated, perished in flames.”

The blaze took place amid a second surge of the pandemic, with more than 1,000,000 officially recorded cases, a daily average of about 8,000 cases and more than 15,200 deaths, the highest of any Arab country. This has overwhelmed Iraq’s chronically underresourced public hospitals, which even under normal conditions are unable to cope, to the extent that patients who can often prefer to get their own oxygen cylinders for treatment at home.

Like its counterparts around the world, Iraq’s venal government has put profits before lives and done little to either restrict the spread of the virus or provide a social safety net for workers, the majority of whom work in the informal sector as day labourers. It has blamed the resurgent infection rates on ordinary Iraqis for disregarding coronavirus precautions. Last month, the government began its vaccination programme, having received just 650,000 doses for its 40 million people, mostly donated by China or through the World Health Organisation’s COVAX programme, with some 275,000 people having received at least one dose, according to health ministry officials.

On Sunday, amid fears that riots would break out, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi held an emergency meeting at the headquarters of the Baghdad Operations Command, which coordinates Iraqi security forces. He declared three days of mourning after ordering an investigation into the fire and later firing several hospital officials and suspending the health minister pending investigations. However, Kadhimi’s pledge to carry out an inquiry and bring those responsible to justice are just empty words. The Iraqi people are still waiting for his promised investigation into those responsible for the deaths of more than 600 protesters in October 2019 to be named, let alone tried and punished.

Kadhimi is sitting atop a social powder keg, and he knows it. Unemployment, already high before the pandemic, has worsened, with at least 36 percent of the people and almost 50 percent of young people officially reported as unemployed. The average 18 year old has

had just 6.2 years of schooling, although only four years in terms of actual educational achievement due to the disastrous state of the country’s education system, once one of the best in the Arab world. Some 3.2 million school-aged children are out of school. In conflict-affected areas, almost all school-aged children are missing out on an education.

Basic services, such as a regular electricity supply in the world’s third largest oil exporter and clean water, are a chimera. Poverty rates are soaring, with 16 million people living below the poverty line, as food prices soar. Cooking oil has risen to 2,500 dinars a bottle, up from 1,500 dinars, while imported foodstuffs have become more expensive because of the recent currency devaluation.

With the collapse in oil prices, the government, which is dependent on oil for almost 90 percent of its revenues and requires prices of at least \$60 a barrel to survive, faces bankruptcy. It needs \$5 billion a month—nearly twice its current revenues—just to cover the salaries of public sector workers, a key form of patronage for the various sectarian-based parties. This is one of the reasons why Baghdad has signed a deal with China to get a cash advance on future oil sales.

Iraq’s Parliament recently passed a 2021 budget aimed at securing Washington’s support for a loan from the International Monetary Fund. The budget formalises the recent currency devaluation, outlines a revised framework for oil and revenue sharing between the federal government in Baghdad and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil and projects a record-setting deficit, along with cuts in salary benefits that can in some cases serve to double workers’ paltry wages.

This, combined with the devaluation that is in effect a savage wage cut, is a massive assault on the Iraqi working class. The budget’s passage prompted daily protests by hundreds of young unemployed graduates outside the Nassiriya oil refinery, demanding jobs and halting production, causing fuel shortages across Dhi Qar province.



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