

Scores die in Iraq COVID hospital fire for second time in three months

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Protests erupted in Iraq Tuesday as the death toll from a horrific fire that tore through a makeshift COVID-19 isolation ward in the southern city of Nasiriyah climbed to 93. The blaze left at least another 100 people injured.

The fire began at 10:30 p.m. Monday night, reportedly as the result of an electrical short in an air-conditioning system, which in turn touched off the explosion of improperly stored oxygen tanks. The fire quickly spread through the facility, which had been hastily constructed from a fleet of trailers made of cheap and highly flammable sandwich panels topped with a tin roof to house COVID patients outside Nasiriyah's al-Hussein Teaching Hospital. The facility was equipped neither with fire extinguishers nor smoke alarms.

Hundreds of relatives and young men from surrounding neighborhoods rushed to the scene of the fire in a desperate attempt to rescue patients, many of them unable to breathe without oxygen and incapable of getting out of their beds, where they died from burns and asphyxiation. Some of the rescuers died carrying patients when the roof collapsed on them, blocking an entrance. In one incident, a young man succeeded in pulling out his father and carrying him to a waiting ambulance, only to see him die because the vehicle had no oxygen.

Angry crowds gathered outside the hospital and the nearby morgue. Distraught family members searched through the still smoking rubble for remains of their loved ones, while many of the recovered bodies were burned beyond recognition. One youth was seen collapsing in tears while searching for his grandfather, father, uncle and aunt, all of them lost in the fire.

Demonstrators outside the hospital chanted "revolution" and "The political parties burned us,"

while setting police cars on fire. Protesters later set up tents and occupied Nasiriyah's central al-Habboubi Square, the scene of mass protests during the nationwide anti-government protests that shook the country beginning in 2019. Nasiriyah was at the center of this rebellion and hundreds were killed and wounded there. Demonstrations were also reported spreading to other Iraqi cities.

The outrage provoked by the entirely preventable fire has been intensified by the fact that this is the second such massive criminal tragedy in the space of barely three months. On April 24, a similar fire ravaged the COVID intensive care unit of the Ibn al-Khatib hospital in a poor neighborhood of southeastern Baghdad, killing 82 people, including patients on ventilators, and injuring another 110. That fire was triggered by an accident causing improperly stored oxygen tanks to explode and, as in the blaze in Nasiriyah, the hospital had no fire protection system and its shoddy construction allowed flames to spread rapidly. At the time, investigators had warned that the same conditions that led to the Baghdad hospital fire existed throughout the country.

President Barham Salih issued a statement Tuesday declaring that the two hospital fires were "the product of persistent corruption and mismanagement that undervalues the lives of Iraqis and prevents reforms of institutions." Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has responded, just as last April, with the suspension of various officials and similar denunciations of corruption. He held a crisis meeting Tuesday that included the head of the Iraqi armed forces and other senior security officials to consider what a tweet from his office described as "the causes and repercussions" of the Nasiriyah disaster. The presence of his security aides indicated that the "repercussions" are foremost on

his mind, with Iraqi society increasingly resembling a powder keg.

While endemic corruption has unquestionably devastated Iraq's hospitals along with every other area of basic services, the horrific inferno in Nasiriyah, like the one before it in Baghdad, is another price paid by the Iraqi people for the systematic destruction of the country's healthcare system and infrastructure by US imperialism.

Until the 1990s, Iraq boasted the most technologically advanced and professional healthcare system in the Arab world, providing free universal primary care to its population through a network of 172 modern hospitals, 1,200 primary care centers and 850 community clinics, and attracting patients seeking treatment from neighboring countries.

The first Gulf War waged by the US military against Iraq in 1991 included a bombing campaign that deliberately destroyed basic infrastructure, including electricity, water and sanitation systems, the foundations of the public healthcare system, while damaging hospitals and other facilities. This was followed by more than a decade of draconian sanctions aimed at bringing down the government of Saddam Hussein by denying the country basic food and medical supplies. High levels of malnutrition, the lack of medicines, and diseases resulting from a lack of clean water were estimated to have cost the lives of half a million Iraqi children by 1995. In a television interview in 1996, then-US Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright infamously stated, "We think the price is worth it."

The decade of sanctions was followed by the 2003 US war of aggression and subsequent occupation of Iraq, which further decimated the healthcare system. Fully half of the already depleted ranks of Iraq's doctors fled the country amid the violence unleashed by the US occupation. The US occupation regime responded with a policy of privatizing healthcare, creating a two-tier system in which the rich are able to access adequate treatment, while the rest of the population is forced to pay for previously basic care, and offer bribes to save the lives of loved ones.

The occupation also placed in power a collection of sectarian-based political parties led by former exiles that have enriched their leaders through wholesale corruption, including the diversion of billions of dollars

from the healthcare system. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this system to the point of collapse.

Iraq is facing a third wave of the pandemic, which, according to official figures has thus far resulted in roughly 1.5 million cases and 18,000 deaths. These figures are considered a gross underestimation of the real toll. Nonetheless, the official case count is now reaching 9,000 a day, a figure universally regarded as threatening an unprecedented spread of the virus and resulting deaths.

Fewer than 2 million Iraqis out of a population of over 41 million have received a COVID vaccination.

The unrest provoked by the mass death at the Nasiriyah hospital comes on the heels of protests over power blackouts and by violent clashes between police and unemployed university graduates demanding jobs outside oil facilities.

As Washington prepares new military provocations to maintain US troops in Iraq, the legacy of three decades of US wars and sanctions threatens to unleash a mass revolutionary upheaval.



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