

Death of boy trapped in well highlights Morocco's social catastrophe

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A massive four-day long rescue operation failed to save the life of Rayan Oram, the five-year-old Moroccan child who fell down a 32-metre deep well shaft.

Rayan had fallen down the narrow well owned by his father, who had reportedly been working on fixing the well, while he was playing outside in the village of Ighrane, 60 miles from the northern city of Chefchaouen. The poverty-stricken region of the Rif mountains is dotted with deep wells.

After initial attempts to rescue him using a rope failed, the family called in the emergency services which believed it was too risky to widen the shaft and decided to use large diggers in the hope of reaching the child from the side. So dangerous was the unstable sandy and rocky terrain that mechanical digging was halted from time to time amid fears that the ground would collapse, threatening the safety of both the crew and Rayan, and the rescue team had to resort to manual digging.

Food, water, a telephone and oxygen were lowered into the shaft, but it is unknown whether the injured boy was able to eat and drink.

As news about the rescue went viral on social media, with the Arabic hashtag #SaveRayan dominating Twitter, the international print media took up the story, turning it into a media circus. The Moroccan government sought to use the world's attention on the rescue operation to rally support and unify the population, under conditions where poverty and social unrest are increasing in the wake of the pandemic that has hit the country hard. But by the time the rescuers reached the child, it was too late.

The government, whose cynicism knows no bounds, deployed bulldozers to pave the road and facilitate access to the funeral site, as well as to prepare a parking

area, while Royal gendarmes, auxiliary forces and local officials were sent to manage the funeral attended by hundreds of people.

Amid the media frenzy, not a single journalist, including in the world's so-called liberal journalists who may have spent a holiday in Morocco and visited Chefchaouen's fabled blue-painted buildings in the medina, even alluded to the economic and social conditions that gave rise to the tragedy. Yet on Tuesday, a seven-year-old boy died after falling into a 50-metre deep well in the village of Al-Sabt, Khemisset governorate, east of the capital Rabat, just hours after Rayan's funeral.

Some 40 percent of Moroccans labour with primitive tools and animal-drawn ploughs on farms that account for only 15-17 percent of GDP, barely scratching a living. Tourism which accounts for around 20 percent of the economy has been decimated by the pandemic. Around 13 percent are registered as unemployed, undoubtedly a vast underestimate, while most households have reported a fall in their incomes as wages have stagnated for years. According to the World Bank, nearly a quarter of Moroccans are poor or at risk of poverty, particularly in rural areas.

Water shortages are one of the country's most critical issues. While the government has focused on mega infrastructure projects, including the Casablanca-Tangier bullet train, new tourist resorts and facilities, and mining projects that consume vast quantities of water, linked to the country's ruling elite and royal family, little is spent on basic infrastructure for workers, peasants and their families.

In 2022, more than 65 years after independence from France, around 45 percent of Morocco's 36 million population do not have access to clean, piped water. A water desalination plant, reportedly the world's largest,

opened a few days ago near the coastal city of Agadir, a major tourist destination, to provide drinking water and irrigation for high-value fruit and vegetables for export. As much as 35 percent of Morocco's water is lost through leaking pipes, while industrial and urban waste pollute the water supply.

Even more telling, this tragedy took place not in the desert but in the Rif that receives more rainfall than anywhere else in Morocco, with some areas receiving upwards of 2,000 mm of precipitation a year. The western area, where this tragedy took place was once well forested but decades of overgrazing, forest fires and forest clearing for agriculture, particularly for the cultivation of cannabis—Morocco, particularly the Rif, is one of the world's major producers—have eroded the soil.

Many of the hundreds of villages like Ighrane in the provinces of Tangier and Chefchaouen are not connected to a drinking water supply. In some cases, villagers get their water from tankers at hugely inflated prices, while others fetch their water from unsecured sources and must carry it over long distances in canisters and buckets. Hundreds of local reports have highlighted the dangers of people resorting to drilling their own wells or holes, often without the proper legal authority, to access water, running the risk of large fines and even imprisonment.

The Rif is one of the poorest regions of the country, long neglected by the government, with little in the way of infrastructure, schools or hospitals. The only means of survival is cannabis production, which while illegal is tolerated as a means of containing the seething tensions that have led to repeated protests in recent years. Last summer, the government introduced legislation that would legalise the cultivation, use and export of cannabis for medical and industrial purposes, but not for recreational purposes, sanctioning production in certain areas including the Rif. It follows the United Nation's removal of cannabis from its list of the most dangerous drugs.

While the government claims that this will improve the Rif's economy, freeing cannabis growers from the international drug-smuggling networks, Riffian farmers fear this is simply a cover for the takeover of cannabis production by corporations and well-connected businesses. These are more able to conform to the legal standards required for medicinal cannabis, which in any

event is only a small market, or the lower-value industrial market. Moreover, there are no plans to provide an amnesty for the nearly 50,000 farmers with cannabis-related arrest warrants hanging over their heads.

Five years ago, protests erupted in Al Hoceima after the fish salesman Mouhcine Fikri was crushed to death in an altercation with the city's police. The protests spread far beyond the Rif region over social conditions in Morocco and political opposition to the Makhzen, the barely disguised monarchical regime that controls the country and serves as a loyal ally of the imperialist powers. Hundreds were arrested, and the leaders of the HIRAK movement that led the months-long protests were sentenced to 20 years in prison. Since then, the government has done nothing to ameliorate the desperate economic plight of the long-neglected region.

In short, the child's terrible death is a product of the economic and social conditions prevailing in Morocco today, the source of widespread and legitimate outrage among workers throughout the country and within the Rif. It underscores the bankrupt and criminal character of Morocco's monarchy and the fraud of independence. The situation is not fundamentally different in any of the country's neighbours: Algeria, Tunisia and Mauretania.

The only way forward is an international revolutionary struggle of the working class that consciously sets out to expropriate the capitalist class, take state power, and run economic life based on social need. This is the struggle being waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, which alone advances a genuine internationalist socialist programme to unite the workers of the Middle East and North Africa with workers in Europe, the United States and internationally in a common fight to put an end to capitalism.



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