

# As Karachi Scorches, Deaths Linked to Power, Water Cuts, Fasting



Family members surround a child suffering from dehydration due to severe heat, at a local hospital in Karachi, Pakistan, June 23, 2015.

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ISLAMABAD—

Sabir Majeed, 59, had been fasting for Ramadan amid Karachi's 45-degree Celsius heat wave when he became dehydrated and fainted Monday afternoon.

His family rushed to fetch water and buy rehydration salts from a nearby pharmacy. They called for an ambulance but none was available.

"Failing to find an ambulance, we hired a cab and took him to the hospital. It was already packed with heatstroke patients and when a doctor came to see him after 30 to 40 minutes, he was pronounced dead," said his wailing wife Shabana Majeed, a resident of Karachi's Orangi Town, a largely poor district.

The Pakistani port city has faced up to 12 to 14 hours a day of power blackouts since Saturday, when temperature in the city soared to 45 degrees Celsius, residents say. Government and hospital officials say that more than 1,100 people have died since Saturday due to the searing heat.

The heat wave in Karachi and some other parts of Sindh province comes less than a month after more than 2,000 people died in similar temperatures in neighboring India.

A range of problems have contributed to the Pakistan deaths, including power outages that have cut off fans and air conditioners, water shortages and the Ramadan day-time fast falling during the long, hot days of summer, families say.

"We pay all utility bills on time but get water shortages and prolonged hours of load-shedding in return. People should stand up against the corrupt and inept government," said an angry Shabana Majeed, who believes her husband would have lived if the family had had access to water and power.

She appealed to the government to restore water and electricity supplies in her area as she said her nine-year-old daughter is also suffering from fever during the heat wave.

Affected families have criticized the government's failure to run an awareness campaign about how to cope during the heat wave, as well as its inability to provide power and the inability of public hospitals to treat many heatstroke patients.

Mussarat Naveed, a resident of the upscale Defense Housing Authority development in Karachi, said her area had faced daily power blackouts of four to six hours before the heat wave struck the city, but that they had now increased to 10 hours a day.

"Even when the light comes, there is so much fluctuation that nothing works. The whole system has collapsed and there is no accountability," she charged.

She said the mortuaries are full to their capacity and heatstroke patients are lying on the ground in hospitals.

"People are getting frustrated," she said, adding that such frustrations could spill into street protests "if the government fails in improving the situation."

### **Artificial rain**

Responding to the criticism, the government said it is planning to use cloud-seeding technology to produce artificial rain in Karachi to lower temperatures.

The Ministry of Ports and Shipping convened a meeting of experts and officials to consider the idea Tuesday but no final decision was reached.

Abdul Malik Ghauri, the director general of the ministry, said by telephone that a second meeting would be convened on the issue this week.

"We are estimating the cost and arranging logistics for the artificial rain. It may take over a week to carry out all the arrangements for the rain," he said.

Meanwhile, Pakistan army and paramilitary rangers have set up special heatstroke relief centers in Karachi and some other parts of the Sindh province to treat patients. But transport to hospitals remains a problem, residents said.

Pervaiz Amir, country director of the Pakistan Water Partnership, a chapter of the Stockholm-based Global Water Partnership, said the government should focus on establishing heat

trauma centers and restoring water and electricity supplies, especially in slums and suburban areas, to deal with heat-related health problems.

Such measures would be more practical and potentially less costly than cloud-seeding technology, he said.

"The situation can be overcome if the government starts informing people about precautionary measures through text messages on mobile phones and running ads on radio and television," he added.

He said summer heat is a predictable phenomenon and the government should improve its early warning systems to plan for it in the future.

But Ghulam Rasul, head of the Pakistan meteorological department, said the current heat is exceptional and related to a low-pressure system over the Arabian Sea.

"The low pressure system will not last more than four, five days and a sea breeze has already started flowing towards Karachi. The temperature of the city has come down to 36 degrees Celsius from 44 degrees Celsius just due to the sea breeze. This will improve further in the coming days," he predicted.