

82 killed in Iraq as fire erupts at COVID-19 hospital



More than 80 people have been confirmed killed in the fire that ripped through an ICU for COVID-19 patients [Thaier al-Sudani/Reuters]

Baghdad, April 25 (RHC)-- At least 82 people were killed and more than 100 injured in a fire that broke out in the coronavirus intensive care unit of a Baghdad hospital as public anger erupted demanding the prosecution of high-level Iraqi officials.

The blaze on Sunday at the Ibn al-Khatib Hospital in the Iraqi capital was sparked by an accident that caused an oxygen tank to explode, according to medical sources. The flames reportedly spread quickly, as "the hospital had no fire protection system and false ceilings allowed the flames to spread to highly flammable products."

Patients' relatives scrambled during the blaze to save their loved ones. Ahmed Zaki, who was visiting his brother when the fire broke out, described people jumping out of windows as the fire spread quickly throughout the unit equipped to treat COVID-19 patients. "In the beginning there was an explosion," he said. "People were jumping... Doctors fell on the cars. Everyone was jumping."

In response to the fire, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi fired the director-general of the Baghdad Health Department in the al-Rusafa area, where the hospital is located. He also sacked the director of Ibn al-Khatib Hospital and its director of engineering and maintenance, according to a statement from the health ministry and his office.

After the fire first broke out, al-Khadhimi held an emergency meeting at the headquarters of the Baghdad Operations Command, which coordinates Iraqi security forces, according to a statement on his Twitter account. In the meeting he said the incident amounted to negligence. "Negligence in such matters is not a mistake, but a crime for which all negligent parties must bear responsibility," he said. He gave Iraqi authorities 24 hours to present the results of an investigation.

Iraq's healthcare system, already ruined by decades of sanctions, war and neglect, has been stretched even further by the coronavirus crisis.

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