Anger rages in Jordan after COVID-19 patients die of oxygen outage

Members of Jordan's Darak forces (gendarmerie) keep demonstrators away outside al-Hussain New Salt Hospital in the town of al-Salt on March 13, 2021. (Photo by AFP)

Amman, March 15 (RHC)-- Hundreds of protesters have gathered outside a Jordanian hospital, where at least seven COVID-19 patients died after it ran out of oxygen. The demonstration took place on Saturday night outside the state-run hospital in the town of al-Salt, some 20 kilometers north of the capital Amman.

It was held despite a night curfew imposed by the government to contain the recent surge in coronavirus cases, blamed on the fast spread of the variant first identified in Britain.

The protesters, including relatives of the victims, were angry about the hospital deaths, which led to the resignations of Jordan's Health Minister Health Minister Nathir Obeidat and the hospital's director, Abdul Razzaq al-Khashman.

Officials said all of the victims were being treated for the coronavirus and that the interruption of oxygen supply lasted around an hour. Obeidat said in a news conference that he "bears all moral responsibility for the incident that took place at the al-Salt hospital." Local media also quoted Khashman as saying that the problem was caused by the high consumption of oxygen in the hospital.

Jordanian Prime Minister Bisher al-Khasawneh ordered an investigation into the incident, while King Abdullah II visited the hospital amid chants calling for the government to step down.   "King Abdullah … was angry and he said things cannot be dealt with this way," according to the report.

Fares Kharabsha, whose parents are hospitalized, said: "My father and my mother are in the coronavirus isolation zone inside the hospital – and I was by coincidence inside when suddenly the oxygen was cut."

"When we asked staff, they said we ran out of oxygen and that they're waiting for an oxygen truck to supply the hospital," Kharabsha added. "We received assistance from the civil defense, some of them were inside the hospital, and they provided oxygen cylinders and they started to resuscitate patients, among them my parents."

Jordan, a country of 10 million people, has so far recorded 469,000 coronavirus infections and 5,285 deaths.

Judicial sources said on Sunday that the director and four other officials of the hospital were detained for a week for questioning over the deaths. Speaking on condition of anonymity, some other sources raised the possibility of a cyber attack on the hospital's infrastructure or an act of sabotage, attributing the incident to external factors. They also blamed it on Israel given political tensions between the occupying regime and Jordan.

Last week, the Jordanian crown prince canceled a visit to al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem al-Quds over a dispute with Israel regarding security arrangements at the site. Jordan, in turn, refused to allow Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to fly through its airspace on his way to the UAE.

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