

Extreme heat hits Iraq, as temperatures exceed 50 degrees Celsius

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Baghdad, August 4 (RHC)-- Extreme temperatures and a lack of electrical power are a deadly combination, and one that is being felt across Iraq. The country is one of the world's most vulnerable to climate change, faced with scorching heatwaves, reduced rainfall, water scarcity, and desertification.

At the emergency department of the Al-Ramadi Teaching Hospital, in Iraq's Anbar province, Dr Ziad Tariq says he receives at least 10 to 15 patients daily suffering from heat stroke and dehydration during the summer.

"A cleaner working outdoors in Ramadi under these conditions was admitted to us last year with heat stroke," Tariq told Al Jazeera on a short break during a busy shift, as the temperature outside peaked at about 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit). "We admitted him to the ICU because he lost consciousness, but he died shortly after."

Outside, the neurosurgeon added, young men are diving into the Euphrates River in an attempt to keep cool from the scorching heat. Most women, he said, stay at home to avoid the blaze of the sun. But this does not necessarily ensure protection from the temperature. "When there is no electricity, people will get into their cars to use the air conditioner."

Last weekend in Iraq, a nationwide power outage caused by an accidental fire at a power station in the southern province of Basra led to the almost total collapse of the country's power grid on Saturday afternoon, adding to the suffering of many across the southern and central regions of Iraq.

On Wednesday, Baghdad recorded a high of 49C (120F) and in Basra temperatures went beyond 51C (123F); the hottest city in the world this week, according to the monitoring group Hot Cities. The temperature across several Iraqi governorates including Maysan, Dhi Qar, Muthanna, Diwaniyah, and Najaf, in the southern part of the country also exceeded 50C (122F), according to the Iraqi Meteorological Organisation.

Erbil, in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, fared slightly cooler – peaking at 44C (111F) – but the streets were notably clear at midday, aside from daily labourers who continued to work. The construction workers who operate under Iraq's scorching sun with little shade have no social security and few employment regulations to point to.

In the city's high-rise and air-conditioned apartments, electronic items regularly shut down in the heat, and residents joke about finding solace in the cool shade of an open fridge. But the situation is no laughing matter. Iraq, with its population of about 43 million, is one of the hottest places on Earth. Matters are made worse as power shortages mean that people have to rely on generators to keep their cooling systems on during the heat.

"Iraq is facing three perfect storms in the next decade," said Azzam Alwalsh, environmental expert and founder of Nature Iraq. "Yet decision makers are not even aware of the abyss facing us, let alone thinking about solutions and the time needed to implement them."

Alwalsh boils the country's most pressing threats down to population growth, a falling demand for oil that will affect Iraq's oil-dependent income, and the increase of extreme environmental events. "Seawater rises, temperature increases, and dust storms are all going to affect Iraq," he said, combined with an increasingly limited water supply caused, in part, by the lack of transboundary water governance with the country's neighbours. "[We are facing] water bankruptcy if the status quo is maintained."

"Population growth that increases demand on services and food and salaries," is another threat, Alwalsh explained. "We are now [a population of] 43 million projected to be 53 million by 2030 and 80 million by 2050. Eighty percent will have no memory of Saddam," he added, referring to former longtime President Saddam Hussein, who was overthrown after the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003.

A recent International Organization for Migration (IOM) report on climate-induced displacement in southern Iraq said that as of mid-June, more than 83,000 people are displaced because of drought conditions across 10 governorates in the country.

“The Global Environmental Outlook regional report for west Asia classified Iraq as the fifth most vulnerable country in the world to decreased water and food availability, extreme temperatures and associated health problems,” said Susan Sami al-Banaa, a UNDP consultant working on Iraq’s Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) implementation plan.

“The suffering of Iraqis during the summer is doubling, and this is not only because of the high temperatures, but also as a result of the unprecedented scarcity of water and the acute shortage of electric power generation,” she explained to Al Jazeera in Erbil.

After Iraq’s accession to the Paris Climate Agreement in 2021, the country submitted its first NDC, which includes promises to expand renewable energy technology, and a request for \$100bn of investment by 2030 to implement the voluntary and non-binding commitments.

“The market for solar energy cells and environmentally friendly technologies is beginning to become more active inside Iraq, despite the many challenges it faces as a result of heat, dust and other economic obstacles,” al-Banaa added, although few Iraqis can afford such technology.

“We expect that there will be a promising market in the near future, as people are increasingly convinced of such radical solutions to the problem of electricity and water and the rise in temperatures as a result of climate change.”

Across the border, Iran this week declared a two-day holiday for public workers because of the high temperatures. According to state media, approximately a thousand people received hospital treatment in Iran’s southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan because of a combination of heat and dust storms.

Iraq’s government also often resorts to granting workers holidays due to the heat, especially when temperatures exceed 50C (122F).

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