

151 killed, 140 injured in Pakistan oil tanker fire

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Islamabad: An oil tanker overturned and burst into flames as crowds rushed to collect fuel that spilled over on a highway in Pakistan's Punjab Province, killing over 150 people and injuring more than 140 others, in one of the deadliest accidents in the country.

The oil tanker coming from Karachi and headed to Lahore overturned early this morning on the national highway at the Ahmedpur Sharqia area of the Bahawalpur district, some 400 km from Lahore, after a tyre burst and the driver lost control. The fire was apparently caused by someone who lit a cigarette after people from nearby localities gathered on the highway to collect petrol, officials said.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was in London to celebrate Eid along with his family members, cut short his visit and left for Pakistan. "This is a tragedy of its kind in the country's history that left everyone in grief in Pakistan. My thoughts are with the victims' families," Sharif said before leaving for Pakistan.

Rescue officials said the blaze from the oil spill engulfed scores of residents, killing 151 people and injuring more than 140 others. "Some 151 people including women and children lost their lives in this tragedy. The condition of more than 50 injured is critical and they are being shifted to Lahore and Faisalabad cities to save their lives," Rescue official Jam Sajjad said, adding that the death toll could rise further.

He said that most of the dead bodies were completely charred and they will be identified only by DNA tests.

District Coordination Officer (DCO) Bahawalpur Rana Salim Afzal termed it a "huge tragedy" in the history of Pakistan.

"At least 123 people were burnt alive and died on the spot while the injured were shifted to the district headquarters hospital and Victoria Hospital in Bahawalpur where the condition of most of them is critical," Afzal said, adding that about 50,000 litres of fuel spilled from the oil tanker.

Muhammad Hanif, 40, who suffered burns, told reporters at the Victoria Hospital that he was present at his house when his cousin called him informing that the village people were rushing to the highway to collect "free oil". "My cousin told me to pick bottles and come out of the house. When I came out of the house, I saw many people rushing towards the highway and some going there by motorcycles. Me and my cousin Rashid reached the highway and joined the people busy in collecting the petrol spilling from the tanker.â€•

"Suddenly the tanker burst and the people gathered near it were burnt alive. Rashid and I were a little away from the tanker therefore we are alive," Hanif added.

He said that it was "greed" of the villagers which took them to the "valley of death".

Video images of the people gathered to collect petrol emerged showing young and old people filling their bikes with the spilled oil and collecting it in bottles and cans. The leaking fuel was even flowing along the highway in the fields. People were seen sitting near the fields collecting fuel in cans and bottles.

"The people from nearby villages had also gathered there. The motorway police personnel who also reached the accident site asked them to leave the place but they started collecting petrol. Suddenly the tanker exploded and within

seconds the fire erupted giving no chance to the people present there to leave the place," Regional Police Officer Bahawalpur Raja Rifat said.

A number of people reached the site on motorcycles to collect spilling petrol, Rifat said.

"It was a scene of the Day of Judgement. Before my eyes a large number of people fell prey to a ball of fire. I was sitting in my car a little away from the oil tanker thinking should I join these people and fill my car fuel tank with free oil when suddenly the tanker exploded and all the people close to it trapped in fire and burnt alive within no time," an eyewitness named Shahzad Hasan said.

Hasan said he along with some other people shifted three injured to the Victoria Hospital. Surprisingly there is no burns unit in the whole district of Bahawalpur.

The Punjab government and army helicopters shifted the critically burnt people to Multan, Lahore and Faisalabad for better health facilities. According to a government official, at least 75 bikes and about a dozen cars were also burnt at the site. Punjab Chief Minister Shehbaz Sharif announced Rs 2 million each for victims and Rs 1 million each for the injured. He also reached Bahawalpur to ensure best medical treatment for the injured.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, President Mamnoon Hussain, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf chairman Imran Khan and Pakistan Peoples Party chairman Bilawal Bhutto condoled the tragedy. Army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa ordered the Army to assist the civil administration in the rescue efforts. Army helicopters have been deployed in the rescue operations.

The tragedy came a day ahead of Eid ul-Fitr celebrations in the country, marking the end of the holy fasting month of Ramzan. The oil tanker tragedy comes about two years after 62 people, including women and children, were killed in a fire after a coach collided with an oil tanker travelling on the wrong side of the road, on the outskirts of Karachi.

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