

Child death toll in Pakistan desert community rises to 62

March 10 2014

At least 62 children have died in a district of southern Pakistan where thousands are suffering from malnutrition, officials said Monday, as the country's top judge called the situation a national shame.

The disaster has sparked public outcry and diverted media attention away from the regular glut of militant attacks, with both Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto's heir Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari visiting the afflicted region.

Local authorities last week ordered a probe into the deaths, which occurred in a stretch of the Thar desert, which begins around 300 kilometres (200 miles) from Karachi and runs up to the border with India.

Chief Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani summoned top officials to the Supreme Court in Islamabad on Monday and said the country should "should hang down our heads with shame" over the conditions that led up to the deaths and the failure of government to prevent them.

Mumtaz Ali Shah, the home secretary for Sindh province where the desert lies earlier told the court: "At least 62 children died, mostly because of unusual cold weather leading to outbreak of pneumonia and poor medical facilities during last three months in Thar."

But the province's advocate general Fateh Malik said the situation was not as bad as had been portrayed by the media, claiming disasters were

the norm in the impoverished area.

He said 120,000 bags of food have been distributed so far and a compensation of rupees 200,000 (\$2,000 dollars) to the families of the dead.

The court directed the officials to file a detailed statement about the situation with a plan of action next Monday.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also arrived Monday in Mithi, the capital of the Tharparkar district, to personally look into the situation, accompanied by Bhutto-Zardari, whose Pakistan People's Party rules the province.

"The provincial government should take steps to prevent any such incident in the future," Sharif said, adding the federal government was ready to assist.

Poor health and communication infrastructure keeps the district disconnected from mainstream population.

In 2000, the desert suffered a famine that killed 90 percent of the livestock, the economic mainstay of the area.

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Citation: Child death toll in Pakistan desert community rises to 62 (2014, March 10) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-03-child-death-toll-pakistan.html>

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