
HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN HOSPITALIZED AS FOOD POISONING STRIKES A DISPLACEMENT CAMP IN IRAQ

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Food poisoning at a camp for displaced residents of Mosul has made more than 700 people sick, with hundreds hospitalized, Iraqi officials said Tuesday.

The incident at the Hassan Sham U2 camp, about 13 miles east of Mosul, has become part of the ongoing dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Saudi media accused a Qatari charity of supplying tainted food to the residents of the desert camp.

Iraqi Health Minister Adila Hamoud told The Associated Press that 752 people in the camp became ill following a Monday night iftar – the meal breaking the dawn-to-dusk fast by Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan. At least 300 people remain in serious condition, he said.

The Health Ministry reported that no one had died from food poisoning. Two deaths cited earlier were from other causes. The provincial governor said there had been one death. The U.N. refugee agency at first reported one death but later said nobody had died. The conflicting reports could not immediately be reconciled.

Amira Abdulhaliq of the UNHCR said it was unclear when the meals had become contaminated, whether it was during its preparation, packaging, transportation or distribution.

"So far, we have received around 800 cases. Around 200 have been transported to the hospitals in Irbil," she said.

Irbil Gov. Nawzad Hadi said the food was prepared in an Irbil restaurant by a local NGO, Ain el Muhtajeen, and funded by a Qatari charity known as RAF. In Saudi Arabia, which has been leading a recent campaign to isolate Qatar, state media quickly seized on the issue with coverage that implied Qatar was poisoning refugees deliberately.

On Twitter, Saudi state television accused RAF of supplying tainted meals and posted images it said showed the camp's children "poisoned by the terrorist Qatari RAF organization."

An Iraqi lawmaker who visited the camp overnight also accused the Qatari charity of providing the tainted food.

At midday Tuesday, medics were treating patients in a large tent at the edge of the camp. About 20-30 patients, mostly children, lay on blankets on the floor as several more serious cases were taken away in ambulances. Most were suffering from stomach cramps and dehydration resulting from vomiting and diarrhea.

Raad al-Dahlaki, chairman of the Iraqi parliament's immigration and displacement committee, visited the camp overnight and said the meal contained rice, a bean sauce, meat, yogurt and water. He put the number of sick at 850.

Al-Dahlaki said the food was distributed by RAF, adding that Iraqi officials were to meet those from the organization later Tuesday. The Doha-based charity did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

At a joint news conference in the camp, Irbil Police Chief Abdulhaleq Talaat said seven people were arrested in connection with the incident.

Since a diplomatic crisis between Qatar and other Arab nations led by Saudi Arabia began June 5, Arab media across the greater Persian Gulf have unleashed a daily barrage of reports highly critical of Qatar. Those reports include stories that alleged Qatar has tried to undermine regional security, often presented without attribution or evidence.

RAF is the acronym for the Qatar-based Thani Bin Abdullah Al Thani Foundation for Humanitarian Services, a charity that collects donations for aid work around the world, including meals for needy families during Ramadan.

RAF is also among 12 organizations and 59 people put on what Saudi, Emirati and Bahraini officials described Friday as a list of terrorist entities and individuals.

On Qatari state television, a repeatedly aired program has discussed how the ongoing diplomatic dispute has stopped it from providing meals to Syrian refugees at a major camp in Jordan.

The Hassan Sham U2 camp houses thousands who have fled their homes in and around Mosul after a U.S.-backed Iraqi offensive was launched in October to dislodge the Islamic State group from Iraq's second-largest city. According to the U.N. refugee agency, it is home to 6,235 people.

Mosul fell to IS in the summer 2014 as the militants swept over much of northern and western Iraq. Weeks later, the head of the Sunni extremist group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the formation of a self-styled caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Months after the start of the offensive, IS militants control only a handful of neighborhoods in and around the Old City, located west of the Tigris River, which divides Mosul into western and eastern sectors.

Kaynak/Source: