Dust storm covers Iraq for second time in a week

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Vehicles drive through Baghdad under reduced visibility during a dust storm that engulfed much of central Iraq, the second such storm in a week.

A dust storm blanketed Iraq again on Tuesday, sending people to hospital with breathing difficulties and leading airports to suspend

flights.

It follows a similar storm that blew over the country late last week and left dozens hospitalised with respiratory problems.

The latest weather event cast an orange hue over the capital Baghdad, where it severely restricted visibility and coated buildings and cars in dust.

Pedestrians wore disposable masks to avoid inhaling the particles, AFP journalists said.

"People have been hospitalised with breathing difficulties, but most cases are minor," health ministry spokesman Saif al-Badr told AFP.

Dozens of flights were suspended in Baghdad and the Shiite holy city of Najaf during the morning, before flights resumed in the afternoon when conditions improved, airport sources said.

While sand and dust storms are not uncommon during the Iraqi spring, they are expected to become even more frequent "due to drought, desertification and declining rainfall", said the director of Iraq's meteorological office, Amer al-Jabri.

Iraq is particularly vulnerable to climate change, with record low rainfall and high temperatures in recent years.

Experts have said these factors threaten social and economic disaster in the war-scarred country.

In November, the World Bank warned that Iraq could suffer a 20 percent drop in water resources by 2050 due to climate change.

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