

Baghdad zoo animals suffer as mercury hits 50 degrees

August 14 2023, by Salam Faraj



A grey parrot drinks water from a bottle as temperatures soar in Baghdad.

A pair of Siberian tigers pant incessantly beside a pond at their zoo enclosure in the scorching summer heat of the Iraqi capital.

Temperatures on Monday breached 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit) in Baghdad for the second day in a row—making life outdoors unbearable for both humans and animals.

The [orange](#), striped felines from far-eastern Russia are more suited to living "where temperatures drop to as low as minus 20 degrees" than in one of the hottest cities in the world, said Wassim Sarih, the veterinarian at Baghdad's only zoo.

Underfunded and run down by years of unrest and mismanagement, the zoo's dilapidated facilities make matters worse for its roughly 900 animals, including lions, exotic birds, bears and monkeys.

Most of the enclosures are open air and "suit animals that live in hot climates", said Sarih. "We don't have ones for animals accustomed to the cold."

In an attempt to lower the temperature, air coolers have been installed in front of the lion cages, and pools are provided for the bears and tigers.

Iraq is unable to provide sufficient electricity to meet domestic needs and is consequently plagued by power cuts that can last up to 10 hours a day.



Brown bears are also kept at Baghdad Zoo.

Baghdad Zoo hasn't seen major renovations since the 1970s, said its director Haider al-Zamili, who is forced to make do with the meager funds the authorities allocate.

Under such conditions, Sarih said "the lifespan of our animals is shorter compared to other zoos".

The zoo's Siberian tigers live for 17 or 18 years while their counterparts in other zoos have a [life expectancy](#) of 20 to 25 years, with the heat making the difference, he said.

The veterinarian said the zoo has lost bears, lions and birds in recent years, some of them because of the soaring temperatures caused by climate change.

Years of drought

The United Nations says Iraq is one of the five countries in the world most touched by the effects of climate change.

Currently the country is facing its fourth consecutive year of drought.

Not a single visitor was seen at the zoo as it's far too hot to venture outside. Only the cries of monkeys and singing of birds can be heard.



A Siberian tiger cools off amid sweltering temperatures at Baghdad Zoo.



A pair of white lions lie in their cage amid sweltering temperatures at Baghdad Zoo.

Karrar Jassem, a zoo employee, is one of the few people seen wandering around the garden under the punishing sun as he feeds the animals.

Like the many [outdoor workers](#) in Iraq exposed to the heat, the 32-year-old said he must provide for his family.

He earns only 250,000 Iraqi dinars a month (about \$165 or 150 euros).

Employees' wages are "very low and don't correspond to the hazards they face, such as potential injuries or joint pains", said Sarih.

The veterinarian said he had contacted the authorities, including the municipality of Baghdad, which is responsible for the zoo, but had yet to come across "any receptive ears".

Sarih predicted the zoo will soon have to close its doors in the absence of an ambitious renovation plan.

"Then the whole community will be a loser," he said.

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