# WHAT HAPPENED IN THE MURREE INCIDENT? WHERE DID WE FAIL AS HUMANS?

# By

# Ramsha Munir

It is not a common notion to hear death by hypothermia in Pakistan and most people might not even be aware of the symptoms that can lead to death. But was hypothermia the real reason behind the cause of death of 8 people in one car, including children and adults and similarly 4 young men who lost their lives?

According to scientific knowledge, hypothermia can develop in temperatures under -50F/-45.5C in people who are not dressed properly and with exposure of skin in less than 5 minutes. With a temperature of -30F/ -34.4C, hypothermia can occur in approximately 10 minutes and a person can die within an hour. Now the question arises, was the temperature that low so as to cause the death at the same time of several people of varying ages in the relative warmth of their vehicles? The temperature dropped as low as -8C on that fateful night of a snowstorm in Murree. Hypothermia affects children, elders (over 50 age), and people with underlying conditions like asthma, diabetes, etc. Symptoms of hypothermia appear when the body loses heat to the surroundings and body temperature loses from 37C to 35C or 32C. The body begins to shiver, the person begins to feel very tired and confused, and experiences hallucinations, shallow breathing, decreased reflexes, and arrhythmia (Increased abnormal heartbeat). Severe hypothermia occurs under body temperatures of 82F/ 28C, which causes stiffness, low blood pressure, muscle rigidity, passing out, and coma. In that case, even slight movement can cause cardiac arrest and, possibly, death. Now the question arises, was it possible for 8 people in one car (mostly children) or 4 male adults in another car to experience hypothermia at the same time without any warning signs or panic from fellow passengers? It is implausible, as hypothermia affects different individuals of different ages differently, and death from hypothermia occurs gradually, depending on the severity of the condition. If the case of death, per car, was one or two especially children or elders, hypothermia could have been the cause, but the entire family/ all passengers dying without any notice is more likely due to Carbon Monoxide (CO) poisoning.

So, is the credible and probable cause of their death CO poisoning, as was also hypothesized in the media in the aftermath of the Murree tragedy, caused due to car air conditioning system being compromised owing to blockage at the rear end of the vehicle because the snow had covered the tailpipes of the vehicles. As a result, carbon monoxide may have been pushed back into the vehicle through the ventilation system, once the exhaust fumes entered the vehicle. Since it is tasteless and odorless, its detection in the air is impossible to identify. CO poisoning occurs when CO builds up in the bloodstream with an excess of CO presence in the air, where the body replaces oxygen in red blood cells, forms carboxyhemoglobin (COHb) as its attraction to hemoglobin is 250 times greater than that of oxygen, and the resulting shortage of oxygen to the brain can be fatal in less than 5 minutes. During sleep or unconsciousness, a person can die even before experiencing any symptoms. Hence, it's safe to assume that the occurrence of many individuals in one car without any panic is most likely due to CO poisoning while sleeping. Lack of information and guidelines for tourists, on how to protect themselves when stuck in cars during a snowstorm, is a more reasonable cause of death in the Murree tragedy than freezing to death. To prevent this in the future, public dissemination of relevant information should be ensured so that people stranded in such conditions may timely clear the tailpipes of their vehicle as well as roll down the windows to avoid suffocation.

What seems like a tragedy could have been easily avoided if tourists who visiting northern areas during winter were to be properly guided on precautionary measures by means of social media awareness campaigns as well as by traffic police and other related public departments en route to, or on site at, tourist locations. Basic information and guidelines can proof life-saving in emergency situations. But these tourists who tragically lost their lives were probably unaware of CO poisoning in cars during a snowstorm; were it not the case, they would have taken precautionary measures. With thousands of vehicles that choked the roads to and from Murree during that fateful weekend, the people were cooped up in their cars with negligible or no help for hours on end. Where we as a community failed, was when Murree’s management failed to realize the plight of stranded tourists in a snowstorm and their dire need for first aid, general safety guidelines, rescue, and humanitarian assistance in time. What happened instead was the display of apathy and avarice, and the rapacious desire to turn others’ difficulty into opportunity for making a quick buck through price gouging. This led to insanely increased hotel rents and other necessaries, forcing people to seek shelter in their stranded vehicles. This was a sorry suspension of our humanity and social solidarity. Greed led a few black sheep to disregard the feeling of community with their fellow human beings and exploit their misery for personal gain. The worst expression of self-interest overpowered their sense of responsibility and community feeling. The cost of their actions was 23 deaths and agony of thousands. In this time of need, corporations like McDonald’s and Ufone behaved more responsibly. Blaming the government and administration won’t do us much good. We need to realize that sometimes that failure of public responsibility is first and foremost the case of the failure of individual responsibility. Being human means reaching out and helping others in need or trouble without thinking about personal profit. If we fail to do this, then we are not schooling our Nafs (the acquisitive self), as Islam teaches us to do. Money is not everything in life. Life matters more than money.