

Indian doctors stage nationwide strike over colleague's murder

AFP- Indian doctors launched a nationwide strike Saturday, escalating protests after the "barbaric" rape and murder of their colleague that has channelled outrage at the chronic issue of violence against women.

The discovery of the 31-year-old doctor's bloodied body on August 9 at a state-run hospital in the eastern city of Kolkata sparked furious protests in several cities across the country.

Many have been led by doctors and other healthcare workers, but also joined by tens of thousands of ordinary Indians demanding action.

In Kolkata, thousands held a candle-lit vigil into the early hours of Saturday morning.

"Hands that heal shouldn't bleed," one handwritten sign held by a protester in the eastern city read.

"Enough is enough," another read, at a rally by doctors in the capital New Delhi.

The murdered doctor was found in the teaching hospital's seminar hall, suggesting she had gone there for a rest during a 36-hour shift.

An autopsy confirmed sexual assault, and in a petition to the court, the victim's parents said they suspected their daughter was gang-raped.

- 'Struggle for justice' -

Those in government hospitals across several states on Monday halted elective services “indefinitely”, with multiple medical unions in both government and private systems backing the strikes.

On Saturday morning, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) escalated protests with a 24-hour “nationwide withdrawal of services”, and the suspension of all non-essential procedures.

“We ask for the understanding and support of the nation in this struggle for justice for its doctors and daughters,” IMA chief R.V. Asokan said, in a statement ahead of the strike.

The IMA called the killing “barbaric”.

“The 36-hour duty shift that the victim was in and the lack of safe spaces to rest... warrant a thorough overhaul of the working and living conditions of the resident doctors,” IMA said in a statement.

Doctors are demanding the implementation of the Central Protection Act, a bill to protect healthcare workers from violence.

Members of the wider public have also marched in several cities this week, including at a candlelight midnight rally in Kolkata that coincided with the start of India’s independence day celebrations on Thursday.

Sexual violence against women is a widespread problem in India – an average of nearly 90 rapes a day were reported in 2022 in the country of 1.4 billion people.

For many, the gruesome nature of the hospital attack has invoked comparisons with the horrific 2012 gang rape and murder of a young woman on a Delhi bus.

That woman became a symbol of the socially conservative country’s failure to tackle sexual violence against women.

Her death sparked huge, and at times violent, demonstrations in Delhi and elsewhere.

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