

# Survivors of India festival stampede recount deadly crush

AFP- Hindu pilgrim Parvati Gupta braved jostling crowds to be at the world's largest religious festival in India but will leave with injuries that will keep her bedridden for months.

The 45-year-old travelled alongside tens of millions of faithful from around the country to be at the Kumbh Mela, a 12-yearly gathering of sin-cleansing ritual bathing in sacred rivers.

Rather than exulting in the holy rites she performed in the waters in the dead of the night, Parvati was on Thursday lying in hospital, wincing in pain and unable to speak.

Her family had already resolved to depart the festival and were on the move when a surging crowd spilled over police cordons, knocking her to the ground, trampling her and breaking her leg.

"The atmosphere was festive but... just when we were about to leave we lost our balance with all the pushing and shoving," relative Anita Gupta, keeping vigil by Parvati's bedside, told AFP.

Both women had travelled to the Kumbh Mela on a train overflowing with pilgrims, arriving in the northern city of Prayagraj hours after schedule and forced to sleep in the open after they were unable to find a room.

Anita credited a group of men for saving them from death after they formed a protective cordon around the pair when the throng began to swell.

But her account of those moments, matched by others in the ward, suggested serious safety lapses and a hapless official

response to a stampede that killed at least 30 people.

Anita said that several routes leading from the riverside had been blocked by police, causing the chaos and overcrowding that led to the accident.

Gauri Sharma, another woman wounded in the crush, said blame rested squarely on the shoulders of festival organisers.

“Authorities had closed off some routes, leaving us stuck in one place,” she told AFP. “Then the entire crowd piled up, with people pushing and pressing against each other.”

– ‘Attained salvation’ –

Wednesday marked one of the holiest days in the six-week Kumbh Mela, and authorities seemed determined not to let the deadly stampede dampen festivities.

Millions of people have participated in sacred bathing rituals as normal and periodic police briefings on Wednesday refused to confirm deaths while downplaying the severity of the accident.

“There was no stampede. It was just overcrowding due to which some devotees got injured,” police officer Rajesh Dwivedi said at one briefing nearly 12 hours after the fatal crush.

An official statement issued that evening credited police at the scene for quickly bringing the situation under control and ambulances for swiftly attending to the injured.

“Eyewitnesses praised the swift action” of police, saying that “their timely intervention prevented a major disaster”, the statement said.

Police finally confirmed that 30 people had been killed and dozens more injured nearly 18 hours after the stampede, once the sun had set and the day’s bathing was drawing to an end.

Several present at the stampede said they believed the police toll was likely understated.

“I am sure that more people died,” Anita said.

Many were also quick to dismiss the official account of the response to the accident.

“Why couldn’t they have prepared better?” Prayagraj resident Rahul Shukla told AFP.

“Everyone knew well in advance that the festival would host more than 100 million people.”

The 27-year-old said he was grieved by the deaths.

But, he added, “those who died at such a holy spot must have immediately attained salvation”.

AFP