

18 dead in India stampede to catch trains to Hindu mega-festival

AFP – At least 18 people died during a stampede at a railway station in India's capital late Saturday when surging crowds scrambled to catch trains to the world's largest religious gathering, officials and reports said.

The Kumbh Mela attracts tens of millions of Hindu faithful every 12 years to the northern city of Prayagraj, and has a history of crowd-related disasters – including one last month, when at least 30 people died in another stampede at the holy confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati rivers.

The rush at the train station in New Delhi appeared to break out Saturday as crowds struggled to board trains for the ongoing event, which will end on February 26.

“I can confirm 15 deaths at the hospital. They don't have any open injury. Most (likely died from) hypoxia or maybe some blunt injury but that would only be confirmed after an autopsy,” Dr Ritu Saxena, deputy medical superintendent of Lok Nayak Hospital in New Delhi told AFP.

“There are also 11 others who are injured. Most of them are stable and have orthopaedic injuries,” she said.

Broadcaster NDTV reported three more dead from the stampede quoting an official of another hospital in the city.

Those dead were mostly women and children.

“I have been working as a coolie since 1981, but I never saw a crowd like this before,” the Times of India newspaper quoted a porter at the railway station as saying.

“People started colliding and fell on the escalator and stairs” when platform for a special train departing for Prayagraj was suddenly shifted, the porter said.

Railways minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said a “high-level inquiry” had been ordered into the causes of the accident.

– ‘Doing our best’ –

Vaishnaw said additional special trains were being run from New Delhi to clear the rush of devotees.

Undeterred by the accident crowds of devotees continued to throng the railway station on Sunday with more police and railway protection forces deployed to control the flow of passengers.

“We are operating an unprecedented and record number of special trains for the ease of passengers,” railways official Himanshu Shekhar Upadhyay told reporters. “We are doing our best.”

Opposition parties, however, criticised travel arrangements for the mega-festival and blamed the government for attempting a coverup, after they denied for hours that a stampede had occurred.

“They are worried about their image at the cost of the faith of crores of people who are visiting Maha Kumbh... There is no arrangement,” opposition Congress party leader Pawan Khera told ANI news agency.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he was “distressed” by the stampede.

“My thoughts are with all those who have lost their loved ones. I pray that the injured have a speedy recovery,” Modi wrote on X.

The governor of the capital territory Delhi, Vinai Kumar

Saxena said disaster management personnel had been told to deploy and “all hospitals are in readiness to address related exigencies.”

The six-week Kumbh Mela is the single biggest milestone on the Hindu religious calendar, and officials said around 500 million devotees have already visited the festival since it began last month.

More than 400 people died after they were trampled or drowned on a single day of the festival in 1954, one of the largest tolls in a crowd-related disaster globally.

Another 36 people were crushed to death in 2013, the last time the full festival was staged in Prayagraj.

AFP