

Massive crowd, chaos preceded deadly India rally stampede

AFP New Delhi

A stampede that killed dozens at a south India political rally happened after a crowd of thousands waited hours in baking heat without sufficient safeguards, officials and witnesses said Sunday.

Some 27,000 people thronged a public road in Tamil Nadu state in hopes of seeing popular actor-turned-politician Vijay on Saturday, but panic broke out and 39 were killed, authorities said.

Witnesses cited hours of delays, insufficient police presence and people falling from a tree branch onto the audience as contributing to the tragedy.

Deadly crowd incidents happen repeatedly during



An ambulance carrying victims makes its way through the crowd following a stampede in the Karur district, Tamil Nadu, on Saturday. AFP

mass gatherings in India, often blamed on lax safety measures.

Vijay, known by one name, was addressing the rally when the crowds surged suddenly, forcing him to halt his speech in Karur district.

Videos on social media showed him tossing water bottles to supporters shortly before the panic broke out.

"My heart is shattered at this tragedy," the 51-year-old star said in a statement.

State Chief Minister M.K. Stalin told reporters on Sunday that 39 people had died, raising an earlier toll of 36.

Nine children were among the dead, he added, announcing a judicial enquiry into the disaster.

State police chief G.

Venkataraman said crowds had been waiting for hours under the hot sun without sufficient food and water after the public was informed that Vijay would arrive at the venue by noon. "The crowds started coming in from 11 am. He came at 7:40 p.m. The people lacked sufficient food and water under the hot sun," he told reporters.