

At least 39 killed in stampede at India's Kumbh Mela festival

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Dozens of people were killed in a predawn stampede at the Maha Kumbh Mela in northern India on Wednesday as tens of millions of Hindus gathered to take a dip in sacred river waters on the most auspicious day of a six-week festival.

Reuters counted 39 bodies in the morgue of the local hospital, where bodies were still being brought in 12 hours after crowds surged toward the confluence of rivers where immersion is considered especially sacred.

Two police sources said all 39 had been killed in the crush at the world's biggest gathering of humanity. Three police sources confirmed a death toll of nearly 40.

"More bodies are coming in. We have nearly 40 bodies here. We are transferring them out as well and handing over to families one by one," one of the sources said at the Moti Lal Nehru Medical College hospital.

Senior police officer Vaibhav Krishna told reporters that 90 people were taken to the hospital after the stampede, of whom 30 had died.

Distraught relatives queued up to identify those killed by the stampede, which triggered calls for authorities and politicians to

be held accountable.

Some witnesses spoke of a huge push that caused devotees to fall on each other, while others said closing of routes to the water brought the dense crowd to a standstill and caused people to collapse owing to suffocation.

"There was commotion, everybody started pushing, pulling, climbing over one another. My mother collapsed ... then my sister-in-law. People ran over them," said Jagwanti Devi, 40, as she sat in an ambulance with the bodies of her relatives.

Saroja, who had travelled for the festival from the southern city of Belagavi and gave only her first name, blamed police for the deaths of four members of her family.

"Police didn't make proper arrangements. They are responsible for this," she wailed.

The state government praised the police, saying their "swift and effective response ... prevented a potential tragedy."

An official at Prayagraj's SRN Hospital, where some of the injured were taken, said those who died had either suffered heart attacks or had comorbidities such as diabetes.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered condolences to "devotees who have lost their loved ones," without specifying the number of dead.

REUTERS



A devotee crosses over a barricade on Wednesday after a deadly stampede at the Maha Kumbh Mela in India. ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS