

# India recoils at repeated rape of young girl

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For months, the police say, a group of men took turns raping an 11-year-old girl.

In the gated community in Chennai, India, where the girl lived with her parents, the men gave her soft drinks laced with drugs, the police said. They filmed themselves raping her, brandishing knives and threatening to release the videos if the girl told her family, the police said.

The men were not intruders in the gated community, but employees who greeted residents, operated the elevator or brought water coolers to apartments.

When news broke on Monday that the authorities in Chennai, a coastal city in the southeast, had arrested 17 men accused of raping or molesting the girl over a period of seven months, chaos erupted at the complex in an older part of the city. Residents dismissed the building's remaining staff members. Women volunteered to guard the complex's entrances, and some called for the suspects to be hanged. Indian television channels ran lengthy news segments with banner headlines that read, simply,

"Chennai Horror."

"This story has shaken me to the core," Rohini Singh, an Indian journalist, wrote on Twitter. "An entire community got together to rape a child. I cannot even fathom the depravity and horror of this act."

This has been a year punctuated by brutal crimes against young girls in India. In January, an 8-year-old was kidnapped, locked in a Hindu temple, gang raped and beaten to death. In May, a teenager in central India was set on fire after her parents told a village council that men in the area had raped their daughter. In June, a 7-year-old was raped in the state of Madhya Pradesh, also in central India. Afterward, the two men slit her throat and left her to die.

A poll released in June by the Thomson Reuters Foundation named India the most dangerous country in the world for women, ahead of war-torn countries like Afghanistan and Syria. In India, a rape occurs at least every 20 minutes, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau.

Indian officials have struggled to figure out what to do. The government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved a measure in April to increase jail sentences for rapists and introduce the death penalty for those convicted of raping children under the age of 12.

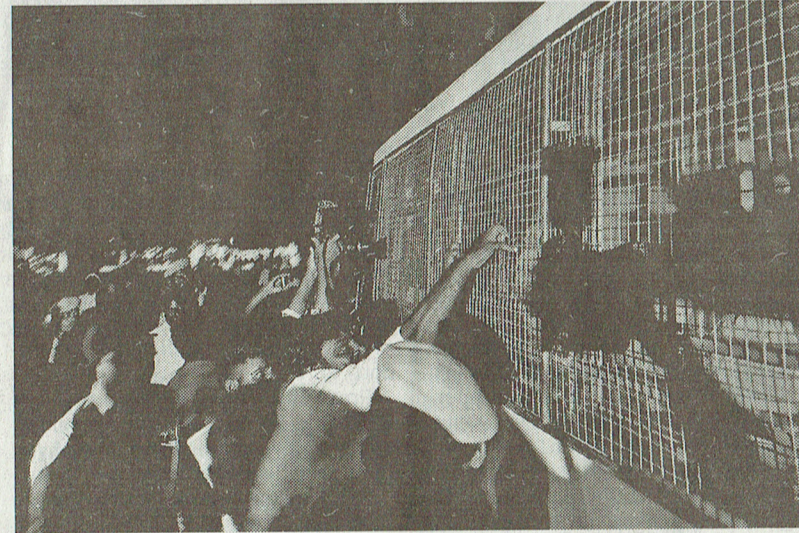
But it is unclear whether the law will have much of an effect. India's judicial system is notoriously backlogged, with millions of cases stuck in overburdened courts. Many of the crimes against young girls that gripped India this year have dropped out of the news cycle.

Some Indians have criticized the near-constant coverage of sexual violence, questioning whether the country's statistics were any worse than other parts of the world.

After the release of the Thomson Reuters report, Shailendra Raj Mehta, an Indian economist, argued in an editorial that India's rape numbers were lower than those of several advanced countries, and said that critics were guilty of the "foisting of a prefabricated narrative entirely contrary to the facts."

The true prevalence of sexual violence is hard to discern in many places around the world, because so many crimes go unreported. In India, reporting crimes can be dangerous. National laws do not always take effect in rural villages, where councils of men mete out their own punishments. As more Indians buy smartphones, the rapid spread of rumors through messaging platforms like WhatsApp has spawned vigilante justice.

In recent months, mobs have killed dozens of people falsely accused of kid-



P. RAVIKUMAR/REUTERS

A police vehicle with the men accused of assaulting an 11-year-old girl for months in Chennai, India. The men were workers at the apartment complex where she lived.

napping young children, prompting the Supreme Court to urge the government on Tuesday to pass an anti-lynching law aimed at curbing the spread of messages and videos that could incite mob violence.

The rape of the 11-year-old girl in Chennai has raised many uncomfort-

able questions. E. Rajeswari, a police inspector in the area, said it was still unclear what had occurred at the apartment building, which is surrounded by slums in the Chennai neighborhood of Ayanavaram. It is a stately complex with hundreds of apartments, a pool and a jungle gym.

Starting in January, the men — ages 23 to 66, who worked as contractors in the building — took the girl to empty apartments in the complex, where they gave her sedatives, tied a belt around her neck, forced her to watch obscene videos and raped her, according to court statements. For months, Ms. Rajeswari said, the girl was "unable to convey what was happening to her parents," who thought she was out playing.

Last week, after the girl's sister noticed marks on her body, the police were approached, setting into motion the arrest of employees in the building.

The men have been charged under laws related to sexual harassment and penetrative assault of a minor, attempted murder and criminal intimidation. In court on Tuesday, a group of lawyers beat the men, who cowered on the ground, and refused to represent them.

But Jagmati Sangwan, the vice president of the All India Democratic Women's Association, said public outrage did not make up for India's "lax prosecution and low conviction rates," which could delay proceedings. She worried that the cycle of violence was one that showed no signs of abating. "These men did not look at her like a child," she said. "They looked at her merely as an instrument to satisfy their lust. What kind of society were they bred in?"