



Hindu pilgrims walk on a bridge at the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers, during the Maha Kumbh festival in Prayagraj on Friday. NIHARIKA KULKARNI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

More than 500 million take ‘holy dip’ at festival in India

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More than 500 million people have taken a “holy dip” in sacred river waters in north India over the past four weeks as part of the Hindu Maha Kumbh festival, authorities said on Friday, greater than the population of most countries.

Attendees at the six-week-long event have ranged from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and federal ministers to industrialists such as Adani Group chairman Gautam Adani and artists including Chris Martin from British rock band Coldplay.

It was marred, however, by a stampede on its most auspicious day that killed dozens as they gathered at the confluence of three holy rivers to take a dip – a practice believed to absolve sins and confer salvation from the cycle of birth and death.

“This participation marks the largest congre-

gation in human history for any religious, cultural, or social event,” the government of Uttar Pradesh state, where the festival is being held, said in a statement. With 12 days remaining, the total count of visitors to the festival is expected to “soar beyond” 550 to 600 million, it said.

The Kumbh Mela is held every three years but carries the prefix Maha, or great, every 12 years because its timing is considered more auspicious. The festival attracted around 240 million people in its previous edition in 2019.

It was organized in Prayagraj city at a 4,000-hectare temporary township created for the purpose – the size of 7,500 football fields.

The highest number of devotees – 80 million – flocked to the festival on Jan. 29, when the stampede occurred. While officials said 30 people were killed, sources said the death toll was more than 50.

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