

Nine prisoners die in Madras Central Jail riot

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At least nine prisoners in Madras Central Jail in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu have died as a result of a pitched battle with warders on November 17. More than 100 were injured and two jailers have also died. Jail authorities and police have not disclosed the exact number of casualties.

The riot erupted after news reached the prisoners of the death of a 35-year-old prisoner, Vadivelu, nicknamed "boxer". The previous week he had received basic treatment in the jail hospital for severe stomach pain and diarrhoea. In the early hours of November 17, he again complained of a stomach pain and was taken to the Government Hospital by ambulance and died.

When the news that "boxer" Vadivelu had died reached the prisoners lining up for their morning roll call they went on a rampage, attacking prison staff, damaging furniture and setting fire to bedsheets, pillows and other materials. Prisoners accused the police of foul play over the death of their cellmate and claimed that he had died on the way to hospital, not in hospital as the police say.

Some prisoners entered the prison record room, bound the deputy jailer Jayakumar to a chair, covered him with record books and set him ablaze. They said he had been singled out because of his very harsh treatment of inmates.

Responding to an emergency call from prison authorities, police reinforcements rushed to the jail. The rapid action force, known as the Tamil Nadu Commando Force, backed by local police stormed into the prison, attacked prisoners with batons and later opened fire on them. After hearing the police firing and the screaming of prisoners, local people rushed to the jail site only to be attacked by the police as well.

The injured were admitted to a number of government hospitals in Madras to avoid a congregation of angry friends and relatives. Women ran

to the ambulances to see if their husbands or sons were among the injured. "I haven't seen such brutality in my years in prison," one prisoner Irudayanathan yelled out. "We questioned them on the death of Velu (Vadivelu) and they opened fire. The first bullet hit my abdomen and the next one on the leg," said Parandaman, a friend of Vadivelu.

A few prisoners lay on stretchers outside the ward as the casualty area filled up. "I would like to talk much about the brutality meted out to us. But if they see me talking to the press, the police will kill me tomorrow," one of them said. A prisoner with swollen eyes and a bloated face said he had been beaten for protesting against the injustice meted out to a fellow inmate.

According to another, Vadivelu was a victim of police atrocities. "The jail officials killed him only because they could not tolerate an inmate raising a voice of dissent," he said. The inmates said they retaliated because of their desire to get even. "Why should we stay quiet when they are beating us black and blue," one said.

The prison riot, which is the worst in Tamil Nadu's history, highlights the deteriorating conditions and sharp tensions in the state's jail system. In February, a violent clash broke out between jail staff and prisoners at the Coimbatore Central prison in which a video camera and tubelights were damaged. Following the incident, prison authorities tightened security measures in all eight of the state's central prisons.

The two-century-old Madras Central Jail only has a capacity for about 1,200 persons but at present houses twice that number. There are shortages of everything from beds to bathrooms. Injured prisoners told the press that jail wardens and police do not treat them well and do not provide proper meals. They also complained that jail officers and police demanded money from visiting relatives and would snatch gifts like fruit from visitors. If anyone protested the police would beat them up.

The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister said the latest incident was unfortunate and condemnable. The main opposition parties—the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), a Tamil bourgeois party, and the Stalinists of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)—called for a judicial investigation and demanded compensation of 500,000 rupees (\$US12,000) be paid to the families of those killed in the riot. But nothing was said about the reasons for the gross overcrowding of the prison system and the appalling conditions of inmates.

Across India there are more than 20 million cases pending in the courts, including 3.6 million in the high courts. Many of those waiting for trial are held for lengthy periods in jail. In the Tamil Nadu state, the situation has been compounded by what is popularly known as the Goondas Act, which provides for detention without trial for up to a year. Passed in 1982, the legislation allows police to detain “goondas” or habitual criminals who are suspected of involvement in bootlegging, drug pushing, prostitution, sandalwood smuggling and land seizures.

Defence lawyers say that the “goondas” law is regularly abused by both police and politicians. Although an application for detention has to be made to an advisory board within three months, the presiding judge routinely rubberstamps the police requests. According to one estimate, the courts have granted detention orders in 90 percent of cases. As a result, a large number of prisoners in Tamil Nadu jails have not even been formally charged but are being held under the reactionary “goondas” law. Many of the prisoners injured in the recent riot were “goondas” detainees.

Justice M. M. Ismail, former Chief Justice of the Madras High Court, produced a report on the conditions in the Madras Central Prison in 1992 after being asked to investigate an escape. Commenting on the prison administration and warders, he said that anything could happen inside the prison—a prisoner might even be murdered by those charged with the responsibility for him. He noted that the prison building was in a bad shape and the Public Works Department had not spent any money to repair it.

Ismail recommended that the jail be moved and ungraded, more highly qualified staff be employed and an emphasis be placed on education and rehabilitation.

None of the proposals have been implemented. The state government has cut funding for the prison system rather than increase it and so is responsible for the explosive conditions that now exist in the Madras Central Prison and other jails.



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