

# Death toll in India's communal violence continues to rise

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Communal violence has continued unabated for nearly two months in the western Indian state of Gujarat, actively fuelled by Hindu extremist organisations and abetted by the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led state government. Hundreds of people have now been killed as Hindu mobs roam the streets of the state capital Ahmedabad and other towns attacking Muslims and burning homes and shops.

In the latest clashes on Sunday, another 17 people were killed and at least 91 injured in Ahmedabad and other towns. Nine of the dead were Muslims killed when police shot into what they claimed was a gathering mob in the state capital. Previously army troops were dispatched to the state after police were accused of openly siding with the Hindu fanatics. A police curfew was imposed in several areas of Ahmedabad as well as other towns.

The violence took place even as Indian Defence Minister George Fernandez toured Gujarat on what was billed as a “healing mission”. The BJP leadership at the national level, including Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, have played a completely duplicitous role—on the one hand, calling for calm in order to appease their partners in the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) who have threatened to break with the coalition, and, on the other, offering barely disguised encouragement to the state government and Hindu mobs.

BJP leaders both in New Delhi and Ahmedabad have painted the carnage as the “spontaneous” reaction to the burning of a train carrying activists of the extremist Vishva Hindu Parshad (VHP) or World Hindu Council at Godhra on February 27. While the exact circumstances in which 58 people died are not clear, some reports indicate that the provocative actions of the VHP supporters were at least partially responsible. The

incident has since been seized upon by the VHP and its chauvinist allies—Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and Rastriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS)—to organise an ongoing communal pogrom.

The *Hindustan Times* reported yesterday that the VHP and Bajrang Dal were preparing to “teach the Muslims a lesson.” VHP international secretary-general Pravin Togadiya claimed a wave of support was sweeping the state for a “final settlement” of the communal problem. According to the newspaper, “Supported by over five lakh (500,000) activists, VHP and Bajrang Dal leaders confer each evening for a ‘reality check’ at the Paldi complex in Ahmedabad. Pamphlets, videos and colour photographs of the Godhra incident are dispatched for mass distribution, ensuring the communal fever does not dissipate.”

Prior to last weekend, the Indian government claimed that the situation was under control. But facts speak otherwise. On April 14 gangs set fire to 10 shops and to houses in Ahmedabad. The following day two Muslims were stabbed to death and another person was shot dead by police. More than a dozen houses were set on fire in the Idgah area of Ahmedabad. Muslim students boycotted state examinations scheduled for April 18 after the state government rejected requests for a deferral due to the lack of adequate security.

According to official reports, just over 800 Muslims have been killed and more than 125,000 made homeless since the beginning of the violence. Other investigations have put the death toll considerably higher with as many as 2,500 people still missing. According to the *Times of India*, the number of dead had passed 800 by the end of March. The *Frontline* magazine noted: “No one knows how many bodies were completely incinerated or remain trapped in debris.” In some cases, especially in villages, whole

families have been killed leaving no one to report the tragedy.

Last Friday Vajpayee inflamed communal tensions by repeating his claim that the communal killings were simply the consequence of the Godhra incident. “Hindus live in their millions but never hurt others’ religious feelings. But wherever Muslims are, they do not want to live peacefully,” he said. The BJP executive committee has rejected calls by opposition parties and Muslim organisations for the removal of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, a long-time BJP member and also allegedly of the fascistic RSS.

Modi and other state ministers have been accused of direct complicity in the communal violence. According to *Frontline*, Gujarat’s Health Minister Ashok Bhat sat in the police control room in Ahmedabad during the first two days of attacks. Urban Development Minister I.K. Jadeja was present in the city when the violence occurred. Among the Hindu extremist groups, the chief minister has become a hero. VHP leader Pravin Togadia declared: “Modi is doing a great job.”

More evidence has emerged of the systematic and preplanned character of the anti-Muslim violence.

India’s *Outlook* magazine reported: “In Ahmedabad, for instance one official recalled how for the last few months, there had been concerted attempts to get lists of Muslim business establishments from the Ahmedabad municipal corporation. The official says he didn’t then realise why these inquiries were being made. He knows now....

“VHP volunteers have also been making the rounds of professional institutions and universities, seeking the names and addresses of Muslim students. Some government sources say VHP members have drawn up lists of government departments (for example, the Food Corporation of India) and their allied agencies, and identified ‘undesirables’ and their addresses. How many of these lists came in handy on February 27 and 28 and even latter is a matter of conjecture but observers say it’s difficult to explain how in clusters of 50 to 100 shops, only those of the minority community were targeted?”

Eyewitnesses reported that the mob leaders spoke constantly on mobile phones indicating they were operating as a network. Some carried computer-generated lists of Muslim homes. The gangs had hoarded thousands of LP (liquefied petroleum) gas

cylinders to blow up Muslim businesses and residences creating a shortage in the city of Ahmedabad. *Time Asia* quoted one mob member as saying: “We want to make sure the Muslims never come back.”

During the first few days of violence, the police openly collaborated with Hindu gangs. In some cases police officers were sent into neighbourhoods to check on the situation before the mob descended. Police fired on Muslims seeking to defend themselves and their neighbourhoods. One victim, who tried to hide in a state transport housing area, told the media: “The police pushed us out of there, saying it was our night to die.”

Another told *India Today*: “The cruelty can’t simply be described in words. The jawans [constables] in the State Reserve Police (SRP) headquarters just next door refused to let us in saying they didn’t have orders from the top. Had they allowed us in, dozens would have been saved.”

Muslim-owned businesses have been devastated. An estimated of 75 percent of bakeries as well as 60 textile and chemical units in Surat and Ahmedabad have been destroyed. Around 18,000 two- and three-wheeler cabs and 800 trucks have been wrecked. Along the 700-kilometre Mumbai-Mehsana highway and other state highways, 700 restaurants have been burned down.

The senior director of the Confederation of Indian Industry, Sunil Parekh, spoke critically about attempts by the Gujarat government to play down economic losses. He estimated that the first four days of violence alone resulted in damage worth more than 20 billion rupees or around \$US400 million.

Thousands of refugees are still struggling in makeshift camps. Human rights organisations have accused the state government of doing nothing to alleviate the lack of food, medicine and proper sanitation for the victims. There are concerns that disease may add to the rising death toll caused by the ongoing communal violence in the state.



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