India: Dozens killed in second stampede at Chennai flood relief centre

Arun Kumar
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In the early hours of Sunday morning, 42 people were killed, including 23 women, and 37 injured in a stampede at an emergency flood-relief distribution centre in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The tragedy took place as flood victims queued to receive food aid at the Arignar Anna Model Higher Secondary Corporation School in MGR Nagar, in Central Chennai. The stampede was the second at an aid centre in Tamil Nadu since floods devastated areas of the state in October. On November 6, six women were trampled to death and 20 others injured in Vyasarpadi, north Madras.

On Sunday morning, people who lost everything in the floods rushed to the relief centre at MGR Nagar to receive a cash grant of 1,000 rupees ($US23), as well as 10 kilograms of rice, some kerosene, a dhoti and a saree. Even though the distribution of relief was not scheduled to begin until 7:30 a.m., eyewitnesses reported that a crowd of 5,000 or more had massed at the school gates by 3 a.m. due to fears they would miss out on urgently needed supplies.

At 3:45 a.m., a heavy downpour started. Seeking shelter, people pushed through the gates and ran toward the school buildings. Scores tripped over a vehicle speed trap on the road and were trampled by those behind them. Hundreds of sandals, umbrellas, ration cards and raincoats were left strewn on the ground.

Local residents and survivors said that a major factor in the tragedy was the number of people who had been issued tokens to receive relief from one venue. The state government has delayed the distribution of flood aid and even closed many local government offices due to public protests over the lack of relief. The anger and desperation of flood-affected poor people is running high.

Many people feel that the stampede could have been avoided had the state government organised flood aid distribution on a regular basis at a number of locations, with police and public address systems to regulate the crowd. Very few police were present at the school on Sunday morning.

A large contingent of police did arrive after the deaths, but only to brutally disperse the crowd with baton charges. One local shopkeeper declared: “We did not know Chennai had this many policemen.” If just half of them been present earlier, he added, the tragedy could have been avoided.

Manikala, a 25-year-old garment worker, had been waiting outside the relief centre to collect the 1,000 rupees—the equivalent of one month’s salary. Speaking from her hospital bed, she said: “The doors of the relief centre opened suddenly and everyone attempted to barge inside at the same time. Before I could realise what was happening, I fell down and people just walked over me, stamping on my chest and face.”

Royappan, a scrap vendor, lost his 32-year-old wife Mary in the tragedy. Through his tears, he bitterly commented: “I asked her not to go to the relief centre as the Vyasarpadi incident, in which six people died in a stampede, was still fresh in my memory. But she wanted to join her neighbours. Now, just for a sum of 1,000 rupees, my children have become motherless.”

The families of some of the dead and injured condemned the government. Murugesan, who was at the hospital visiting his injured wife, said: “The authorities should have taken more measures. This is the second such incident in two months.”

The flooding over four weeks in October and early November, and again in early December, has taken the lives of at least 279 people and left some 200,000 homeless. It caused extensive damage to highways and roads, railways, and irrigation networks. The grossly

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inadequate relief measures have exacerbated the plight of ordinary people affected by the natural disaster.

In response to Sunday's tragedy, however, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalithaa blamed the victims and her political opposition. "Some mischievous elements wanted to give a bad name to my government and spread rumours that relief is being distributed in the wee hours despite the fact that relief distribution centres open only at 0900 hours," she said.

In order to pacify angry victims, however, and also with an eye to elections early next year, the state government has announced that an inquiry into the causes of the stampede by a retired High Court judge. Jayalalithaa also announced a compensation payment of 100,000 rupees to each bereaved family and 15,000 rupees for the injured.

The opposition Democratic Progressive Alliance (DPA), which is seeking to make political mileage out of disaster, has demanded that Jayalalithaa resign. An opposition resolution blamed the heavy loss of lives on the failure of the ruling party—the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam—to organise adequate flood relief and condemned the police baton charge. Opposition politicians held a silent procession on Monday to mark the 42 deaths.

The opposition, however, is no more concerned about the plight of the flood victims than the state government. Congress, which is part of the DPA, leads the ruling coalition at the national level. New Delhi has allocated just 5 billion rupees ($US110 million) out of the 136 billion asked for by the Tamil Nadu government. Jayalalithaa has, of course, used the lack of federal assistance to point the finger of blame at her opponents.

Jayalalithaa boasts that her government's free market policies are transforming Tamil Nadu into India's premier state, but the recent floods have exposed once again the growing social gulf between rich and poor. Over 12 million people in the state still live in poverty, especially in rural areas. Poverty levels are especially high in Chennai, at 44.23 percent of the population.

Even in the best of times the poor of Chennai struggle to survive from day to day. The widespread flooding in the city has had a devastating impact, which, combined with the lack of aid and assistance, has left many people desperate. The tragic events of last Sunday were the inevitable consequence.

The failure of state and federal governments to systematically provide adequate relief, particularly after the first stampede in November, can only be described as criminal.

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