

Suspension bridge collapse in Indian state of Gujarat claims over 140 lives

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At least 141 people, including dozens of children, are dead, with scores more injured, after a 143-year-old pedestrian cable-suspension bridge straddling the Machchhu River in Morbi city in the western Indian state of Gujarat collapsed last Sunday evening, around 6:30 pm.

Rescue operations by the army, navy and national disaster rescue personnel were still ongoing Tuesday, with many people reported missing. As a result, the death toll is almost certain to rise significantly.

The bridge was prematurely thrown open to the public on October 26, the Gujarati new year day, after being closed for repairs and renovations for several months. The decision to reopen the bridge was taken by the private company that was given charge of bridge operation and maintenance at the insistence of the Gujarat state government earlier this year. The horrific incident has caused widespread shock not just in Gujarat, but throughout the country.

Both municipal and Gujarat state authorities are complicit in this entirely preventable tragedy. The Oreva watch company, which claimed to have carried out extensive repairs and renovation on the bridge, failed to even seek, let alone obtain, the requisite fitness certificate from the municipal authorities before opening the bridge. Yet neither the municipal nor the state government stepped in to prevent the reopening from going ahead, despite the fact that the bridge was known to have suffered severe damage in a 2001 earthquake.

The bridge collapse is a major embarrassment for the national Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, led by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Gujarat is the home state of both Modi, who served as chief minister from 2002 to 2014, and his chief henchman Amit Shah, who is India's Home Minister. Shah is known as the

main implementor of the BJP's virulent Hindu-communalist campaign, including threatening to push migrants from Bangladesh into the sea and enacting the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act.

Gujarat is set to hold state assembly (parliament) elections in December. The bridge collapse is therefore a serious political problem for the BJP, which has ruled the state for the past 27 years and overseen sweeping business deregulation and privatization. The Modi-led BJP national government has made privatization of all public assets, including bridges, roads, enterprises and railways, a central feature of its domestic policy ever since it came to head the national government in 2014. Opposition to Modi and the BJP is growing due to its disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in more than 5 million deaths and India's pandemic of poverty, hunger and mass joblessness, which has been further exacerbated in recent months by sharply rising food and fuel prices.

Modi was on a three-day visit to Gujarat and the neighboring state of Rajasthan when the tragedy occurred. He inaugurated an aircraft manufacturing facility and participated in "National Unity Day" celebrations on the birth anniversary of Vallabhbhai Patel, a right-wing Congress Party leader from Gujarat and India's first home minister. It was Modi's second visit to the state since October 10, as he seeks to strengthen the BJP's re-election effort.

The state BJP government has announced a measly compensation of Rs. 400,000 to the kin of each deceased person, whereas the Modi-led national government announced half that amount. Taken together, this amounts to total compensation of just \$7,300 for those who lost relatives. People who were injured will receive a derisory Rs. 50,000 from the state and national government.

Around 500 people were standing on the bridge when it collapsed, despite it having a maximum capacity of 125 persons. The overcrowding occurred because the Oreva watch company had sold an excessive number of tickets and allowed hundreds of people to get on the bridge, a major tourist attraction, especially during the festive new year season. The bridge started swaying dangerously and then snapped, plunging the victims into the river, many on top of each other. Most of the dead were women and children or elderly people. Out of the dead, 78 were elderly and 56 were children, according to official figures.

A Morbi resident, Ranjanbhai Patel, commented to the media, 'As most of the people had fallen into the river, we were not able to save them.'

Another young man was quoted by the BBC as saying, 'My sister and I fell in the water. I survived but my sister is still missing. I went to the government hospital, searched everywhere, but my sister is nowhere to be found.' Weeping, he said he has been looking for her since Sunday evening.

More casualties are expected as the rescue mission continues. 177 people have been rescued so far. Dozens of people were critically injured. TV footage showed people holding the cables and remains of the bridge as emergency teams tried to reach them. Some attempted to climb up the wrecked bridge while others swam to safety.

Officials confirmed that the bridge collapsed because it could not bear the weight of so many people. Sandeep Singh, the chief municipal officer of Morbi, stated to the press, "Historically, only 20 to 25 people used to go in a batch on the bridge and that has always been there."

While the police were quick to arrest the nine people responsible for operating the bridge, it is the top officials of the city and the BJP state government who bear chief responsibility. Up until March 2022, the upkeep of the bridge was under the jurisdiction of the municipality. However, the municipality handed over its maintenance and operation through a public tender to the Oreva watch company, which has no experience in operating bridges, let alone supervising bridge repair.

Lower-level municipal officials were reluctant to grant the contract for the bridge's operation and maintenance to a watch company. But the municipal

authorities were reportedly compelled to do so after receiving a nudge from the BJP state government. This is because the multi-millionaire owner of Oreva is a big supporter of the BJP and is politically well-connected.

The Gujarat government claims to have appointed a five-member committee to probe the bridge collapse. However, it is all but certain that the real culprits including ministers in the BJP government will be shielded while obfuscating the totally corrupt nexus between BJP politicians and industrialists.

The tragic events of the weekend are just the latest in a long series of failures of basic infrastructure. Many of India's bridges and roads are in woeful shape and tens and even hundreds of thousands of people perish every year from flooding, bridge collapses and landslides.

While visiting Morbi, Modi expressed his condolences to the families of those who lost their lives in the bridge collapse. "Rarely in my life, would I have experienced such pain," he claimed. He called for a "meticulous" investigation.

India's Supreme Court is scheduled to hold hearings on November 14 in response to a public interest litigation filed on behalf of the victims. Filed by an advocate, it charges the government authorities with negligence and utter failure to protect the public.



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