



Rwanda lawmakers debate third term for Kagame

## BANGLADESHIS DEMAND KILLERS HANG OVER BOY'S LYNCHING



PARIS: Mexican troops, foreground, walk down the Champs-Élysées avenue as part of Bastille Day parade yesterday, in Paris, France. Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto is the guest of honor at this year's event marking France's biggest holiday. —AP

# STAMPEDE KILLS 27 PILGRIMS IN INDIA

## MOST OF THE VICTIMS WERE WOMEN

**GODAVARI:** A stampede on the banks of a holy river killed at least 27 pilgrims yesterday in southern India in a tragic beginning to a religious festival season.

The stampede in Rajahmundry, on the border of the twin states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, erupted about two hours after the dawn start of the Maha Pushkaralu festival which sees thousands of people bathe in the Godavari river. "Twenty-seven people have now been confirmed dead in the stampede and another 29 are injured," Parakala Prabhakar, a spokesman for Andhra Pradesh's Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, told AFP.

District official H. Arun Kumar put the

number of injured at 40 while confirming that 27 people had died. While the identities of all the victims had yet to become clear, police and other officials said most of the victims were women and included a 15-year-old girl.

Images broadcast on television showed tearful relatives grieving over lines of bodies on the river bank. Rescuers wearing life jackets could also be seen trying to haul lifeless bodies into their inflatable rafts which were patrolling the river. A. Srinivasan Rao, a deputy superintendent of police in Andhra Pradesh, said the disaster happened when crowds built up around one set of steps leading to the water,

known as ghats.

"The first set of worshippers were coming out of the river after taking a dip and then got in the way of others who wanted to be in the water at an auspicious time," Rao told AFP. However Satyamurthy Chebolu, a volunteer for an organisation that helps run the festival, said the stampede happened when authorities sealed off a bathing ghat meant for the public in order to allow VIPs privacy.

The crowd apparently grew angry at being made to wait, and started pushing past the barriers. "The problem was that they let VIPs go into the water while keeping the public at bay, so eventually the

public got angry and demanded they be allowed to enter the ghat too," Chebolu told AFP from the scene. "Some people started pushing from the back of the crowd, and that turned into a stampede where people got trampled. The police tried to stop them but the crowd easily pushed the police away."

"The crowd was huge—there were maybe 20,000 people in the area, and maybe 3,000 people in the stampede. The ghat is just not built for that many people. It was also unbearably hot, so many people were anxious to cool off in the water."

### Modi 'deeply pained'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote on Twitter that he was "deeply pained at the loss of lives" and offered condolences to the families of victims. The chief minister's spokesman Prabhakar said that an ex-gratia compensation payment of one million rupees (around \$15,750) had already been approved for victims of the stampede. The start of Maha Pushkaralu coincides with the official beginning of the larger Kumbh Mela festival at Nashik in the western state of Maharashtra.

Millions of pilgrims are expected in Nashik over the next two months, the site of a stampede in which 39 people were killed when the Kumbh was last held there in 2003.

Only a few hundred people attended a flag-raising ceremony on Tuesday which marked the opening and mass crowds are not expected to gather until the first main bathing day on August 29.

Organisers expect up to ten million pilgrims to attend the main Kumbh Mela bathing dates, which fall on August 29, September 13 and September 18, and 20,000 police are being deployed to control the crowds.

The dates for the Kumbh Mela and the Pushkaralu festivals are set by religious leaders to coincide with the most auspicious days in the Hindu calendar. Stampedes at India's religious festivals, where a mixture of police and volunteer stewards are often overwhelmed by the sheer size of the crowds, are not uncommon. Around 115 people were killed in October 2013 at a stampede near a temple in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, site of another deadly stampede there seven years earlier. —AFP



HYDERABAD: Indian devotees react after a stampede at a religious festival in Godavari in the Rajahmundry district some 200 kms north-east of Hyderabad yesterday. The death toll from a stampede yesterday, on the banks of a holy river in southern India has risen to 27, the state government said. — AFP

## KENYA MASSACRE MALL READY TO REOPEN

**NAIROBI:** Owners of Kenya's Westgate mall, closed after Somali Islamists massacred 67 people almost two years ago, vowed yesterday it would be safe as journalists toured the mall ahead of its reopening.

The mall was badly damaged in the four-day siege in September 2013, when four gunmen from the Al-Qaeda-linked Shebab walked into the upmarket mall, tossing grenades and killing shoppers and staff.

Yesterday, painters were putting finishing touches to the inside of the mall, which is to set to reopen on Saturday.

In the mall's main hall, where shoppers once played dead as gunmen stalked the corridors killing those they found, the stores appeared back to normal, missing only the shoppers that owners hope will return.

"Exactly 22 months ago we had one of the saddest days in Kenyan history," Nairobi governor Evans Kidero told reporters outside the building, once one of the Kenyan capital's most prestigious shopping locations.

"As a nation we cried, we mourned but... Westgate is back." The rear of the mall, once a multi-storey carpark with a flat rooftop where gunmen shot shoppers at a children's cooking competition, collapsed following a fierce blaze started by the fighting. That section was not open yesterday.

Atul Shah, who heads the main regional supermarket chain Nakumatt—whose store in the mall was where many of the victims were hunted down in aisles and killed—said they were ready to reopen.

"Nakumatt is back, and so are the other tenants who were here previously—and a few new ones," Shah told journalists who visited the mall yesterday, promising the "majority" will open business on Saturday.

### US security warnings

Mall shareholder Alex Trachtenberg promised security measures had been put in place.

"We have complied with the international anti-terrorism unit who have recommended what to do and what to enhance, so we are working together closely with them," Trachtenberg said.

Since Westgate, the Shebab have continued to launch attacks in Kenya. In April, the militants massacred 148 people in Kenya's northeastern Garissa University. This month, attacks includes a roadside bomb on Monday in the eastern coastal Lamu region, which killed five civilians on a police truck, as well as a night raid on quarry workers, killing at least 14.—AFP