

After stampede, police slapped, cane-charged us: survivors

Survivors of Sunday's ghastly stampede at the Naina Devi temple in Himachal Pradesh said the meagre police force present at the shrine were more busy 'slapping and cane-charging people' than bringing the situation under control after 145 people were killed.

'I was slapped by a policeman there when I sought his help following the stampede. Then other policemen joined in and lathi-charged the crowds present there. This made things worse after the stampede. Had the police helped people, the casualties would not have been so high,' Bali Singh, a devotee from Haryana Fatehabad town, told IANS here.

Bali Singh, who lost both his young daughters Gurmit and Malkit in the tragedy, said he will have to live with the trauma of being unable to save his daughters.

The Civil Hospital in this Sikh pilgrimage town, 90 km from Chandigarh and 30 km from the hill shrine, was Sunday afternoon full with bodies of victims.

'We have been receiving bodies in heaps since the first truckload arrived around 2 p.m. There is not even enough space to put up the bodies properly so we have put them up in all available places,' a hospital attendant said.

As relatives of the victims kept pouring in at the hospital in the afternoon and evening, hospital staff said this was the worst tragedy they have ever witnessed.

Wails and cries of survivors and relatives kept coming in periodically as the bodies - about 145 of them - were identified one by one and the police and hospital staff completed legal and post-mortem examination formalities.

'There were hardly any policemen at Naina Devi keeping in view the crowds that came Sunday. And when the rumour of a landslide led to mayhem and stampede, the policemen only aggravated the situation by cane-charging people. Two of my nieces died in the stampede but I was able to save many others,' survivor Hakam Singh told IANS here as he completed formalities to get bodies released.

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal, who flew in to this town in the evening, said an inquiry would be conducted into allegations that enough police force was not present at the shrine and that the police used force against the helpless devotees after the stampede.

'We will take action only after an inquiry,' Dhumal said here after journalists asked him about survivors' complaints.

Hospital senior medical officer (SMO) Ashok Sharma told IANS that 25-30 post-mortems were being conducted every hour. 'We have constituted 10 teams of doctors for this. The doctors have been called from nearby towns,' he added.

Ice slabs were being requisitioned from Ropar district headquarters Nangal and other places as the bodies lying here started emitting a foul smell.

Volunteers from this town, including those from an NGO led by Baba Labh Singh, helped the authorities in unloading the bodies and arranging facilities for relatives coming here

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