

10 DEAD AS CASTE RIOTS RAGE IN NORTH INDIA

NEW DELHI REELS FROM WATER CRISIS, SCHOOLS CLOSED



SRINAGAR: Indian women cry during a funeral for civilian Abdul Gani in Gundipora village, in Pulwama district south of Srinagar yesterday. Gani was hit by a bullet in crossfire between militants and Indian troops.—AFP

5 KILLED IN KASHMIR STANDOFF BETWEEN TROOPS, REBELS

SRINAGAR: A handful of rebels holed up in a building in the Indian portion of Kashmir exchanged fire with government forces for the second straight day yesterday, raising the number of dead to four soldiers and one civilian. Another 13 paramilitary troops have been wounded in the standoff.

The rebels, numbering two to three, fired guns and grenades early yesterday as Indian commandos tried to storm the government building where they have been hiding since Saturday, said paramilitary spokesman Bhavesh Chaudhary.

The latest firing killed an army captain and a soldier belonging to the army's special forces and injured four paramilitary soldiers, said army spokesman Col Nitin N Joshi. Two paramilitary soldiers and one civilian were killed Saturday and nine paramilitary troops were hospitalized. The militants, who are fighting against Indian rule over the disputed Himalayan region, then fled to a nearby government building and forced more than 120 trainees and staff inside to leave.

Fresh firing erupted yesterday morning after the Central Reserve Police Force and soldiers surrounded the training institute overnight, with the militants still holed up inside.

As an intense gunbattle raged between security forces and the insurgents, a portion of the five-story government building caught fire.

The standoff started Saturday when the militants fired automatic rifles as they ambushed a convoy of Indian paramilitary soldiers before taking refuge in the nearby government building. They allowed more than 100 civilian government employees to leave the building without any harm.

Anti-India protests and clashes broke out yesterday in several neighborhoods in the saffron-rich Pampore area, where the militants are holed up. Witnesses and officials said hundreds of youths, chanting "Go India, go back" and "We want freedom," ignored the appeals from police to stay away from the site of the gunbattle and hurled rocks at police and paramilitary soldiers.

Government troops fired tear gas and pellet guns to disperse the protesters. At least three protesters were hospitalized with wounds from pellet guns, police said.

Kashmir has been divided between rivals India and Pakistan since they won independence from Britain in 1947. Both claim the Himalayan territory in full. Overall violence in the restive territory has sharply declined during the last decade, but armed clashes between rebels and government forces still break out regularly.—Agencies

LEADING HINDU PRIEST SLAIN IN BANGLADESH

DHAKA: A top Hindu priest was decapitated by attackers in northern Bangladesh yesterday and two worshippers wounded, police said, in the latest assault targeting minorities in the Muslim-majority nation.

Two assailants armed with pistols and cleavers attacked Jogeswar Roy, 45, the head priest of Sri Sri Sant Gourio Math, at his home in the temple yesterday morning, officials said.

"The priest was preparing for morning prayers when they pounced on him and slit his head from the body at the verandah of his home inside the temple," said Shafiqul Islam, a government administrator in the sub-district Debiganj where the temple is located.

"We recovered a blood-stained cleaver from the spot," he said. Two devotees were wounded in the attack including one who was shot as he tried to save the priest, he added. The motive for the murder was not clear but police said Islamist militants were among those suspected as being behind the killing.

District police chief Gias Uddin Ahmed said police had launched a hunt for the attackers and security checkpoints had been set up across the district. "The Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) is also in our list of suspects," Ahmed said. The banned group is believed to have been behind an attack on an Italian Catholic priest in the neighboring district of Dinajpur late last year.

Bangladesh has seen an upsurge in attacks on minorities including Shiites, Sufis, Christians and Ahmadis by Islamist militant groups. The government rejects the Islamic State's claims of responsibility for several recent attacks, including the shootings of two foreigners.—AFP



DHAKA: Bangladeshi relatives of a top Hindu priest react after he was killed in the remote northern district of Panchagarh yesterday.—AFP

ROHTAK, India: Ten people have died in caste protests which triggered widespread arson and looting in a north Indian state, police said yesterday, as New Delhi faced a water crisis after mobs shut down a key supply.

Thousands of troops with shoot-on-sight orders were deployed on Saturday in Haryana state, a day after week-long protests turned violent with rioters setting fire to homes and railway stations and blocking highways. Ten people have been killed and about 150 injured in the state since Friday when officers fired on rioters, Haryana police chief Yash Pal Singal told a press conference, updating earlier estimates of five dead.

The Jat caste is leading the protests, demanding quotas for government jobs and university places, saying they are struggling to find employment and education opportunities despite India's strong economic growth.

India reserves places for lower castes in measures intended to bring victims of the country's worst discrimination into the mainstream. But the policy causes resentment among Jats, a rural caste which owns farms, and among other communities, who say it freezes them out.

Protesters again took to the streets overnight despite the stepped-up security, torching shops in Haryana's Rohtak district which is the epicentre of the violence, a local police officer told AFP.

"There were clashes during the night across the district. Over a dozen buildings were set on fire by protesters, with incidents of looting of shops and ATMs at two places," the officer said on condition of anonymity. A local police officer in Jhajjar, whose district borders that of



CHANDIGARH: Indian residents from the Jat community block the Chandigarh-Shimla highway amid violent caste protests in Panchkula yesterday.—AFP

Rohtak, earlier told AFP that five people were killed on Saturday "when the army opened fire on a mob".

Water crisis

As the crisis escalates, the Indian capital's water supplies have been hit after mobs forced the shutting of sluice gates at a canal in Haryana which takes water to the capital's treatment plants. More than 16 million people in India's capital are facing a major water crisis as a result of the violent demonstrations. The protesters have damaged equipment that brings water from Munak canal in

Haryana state to New Delhi, depleting the capital's water supply. New Delhi gets about 60 percent of its water from the neighboring state.

After holding emergency meetings, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal announced water rationing throughout the city, and said schools would be closed today to conserve supplies. "Water to be equally rationed amongst all. Pl save water. Schools closed tomo," Kejriwal said on Twitter. Talks aimed at ending the violence were set to be held later Sunday in Delhi between Jat leaders, including those involved in the protests, and

national Home Minister Rajnath Singh.

"We are working on immediately ending the violence," national Jat leader Yashpal Malik, who will take part in the talks, told AFP. Protesters maintained blockades of roads into Haryana despite the impending talks, television footage showed. Hundreds armed with sticks halted vehicles along one key route which was also blocked with fallen trees, an AFP photographer reported.

The photographer saw at least a dozen gutted buildings including a school in the town of Sampla five kilometres (three miles) from Rohtak city.—Agencies

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