

Haj stampede: Death toll of Indians killed rises to 18

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Mina: The death toll of Indian pilgrims has risen to 18 in the grisly stampede at the Haj which has so far claimed the lives of 717 people, the worst tragedy to hit the annual pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia in 25 years.

"18 Indian Hajis are now confirmed dead," Spokesperson in the Ministry of External Affairs Vikas Swarup said yesterday.

Of the 18 Indian victims, nine hailed from Gujarat, three from Tamil Nadu and one each from Telangana and Kerala. Four others are yet to be identified.

At least 13 Indians were also among the over 800 people injured in the tragedy.

As Muslim pilgrims somberly resumed the final rites of Haj yesterday, Saudi Arabia's King Salman has ordered a safety review and a "revision" of the Haj organisation.

Leading the criticism against Saudi Arabia, its regional rival Iran expressed indignation at the deaths of 131 of its nationals at the world's largest annual gathering of people and suggesting Riyadh was incapable of managing the event.

As the blame game erupted, Saudi Arabia on its part suggested pilgrims ignoring crowd control rules bore some blame for the stampede. At least 863 pilgrims were also injured in the mishap in Mina during the Haj's last major ritual.

The stampede "was perhaps because some pilgrims moved without following instructions by the relevant authorities," Saudi Health Minister Khalid al-Falih said in a statement.

King Salman ordered the formation of a committee to investigate the incident during the five-day pilgrimage in which around two million people from more than 180 countries took part. The pilgrimage in which 1.5 lakh pilgrims from India also took part ends today.

Haj is one of the five pillars of Islam that should be performed at least once in lifetime by every Muslim who is financially and physically capable.

The stampede broke out after two massive lines of pilgrims converged on each other from different direction at an intersection close to the five-storey Jamarat Bridge in Mina for symbolic stoning of the devil by throwing pebbles against three stone walls.

It occurred at the intersection of two streets leading to Jamarat, about five km from Makkah.

It was the second major accident this year for pilgrims, after a construction crane collapsed on September 11 at Mecca's Grand Mosque, Islam's holiest site, killing 109 people, including many foreigners.

The Saudi civil defence authority said 717 pilgrims from different nationalities were killed and 863 others were injured in the stampede.

- PTI