

## Death toll rises in Delhi anti-Muslim riots

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A shop burns as a mob sets it on fire during violence between two groups in New Delhi, India, Tuesday, February 25, 2020. At least 10 people were killed in two days of clashes that cast a shadow over President Donald Trump's visit to the country. (AP Photo)

At least 24 people were killed and 189 injured in three days of clashes in New Delhi that coincided with President Donald Trump's first state visit to India, with the death toll expected to rise as hospitals continue to take in the wounded, authorities said February 26.

Shops, Muslim shrines, and public vehicles were left smoldering from violence between Hindu mobs and Muslims protesting a new citizenship law that fast-tracks naturalization for foreign-born religious minorities of all major faiths in South Asia except Islam.

The clashes were the worst communal riots in the Indian capital in decades. The law's passage in December earlier spurred massive protests across India that left 23 dead, many of them killed by police.

The dead included a policeman and an intelligence bureau officer. The government has banned public assembly in the affected areas.

National Security Adviser Ajit Doval toured the northeastern neighborhoods of Delhi where the rioting occurred, seeking to assure fear-stricken residents, including a female student who complained that police had not protected them from mobs who vandalized the area and set shops and vehicles on fire.

While clashes wracked parts of the capital, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted a lavish reception for Trump, including a rally in Modi's home state of Gujarat attended by more than 100,000 people and the signing of an agreement to purchase more than \$3 billion worth of American military hardware.

On February 26, Modi broke his silence on the violence, tweeting that "peace and harmony are central to [India's] ethos. I appeal to my sisters and brothers of Delhi to maintain peace and brotherhood at all times."

New Delhi's High Court ordered the police to review videos of hate speeches allegedly made by three leaders of Modi's party and decide whether to prosecute them, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

The clashes escalated on February 25, according to Rouf Khan, a resident of Mustafabad, an area in the capital's northeast.

Khan said mobs with iron rods, bricks, and bamboo sticks attacked the homes of Muslims while chanting "Jai Shri Ram," or "Victory to Lord Ram," the popular Hindu god of the religious epic Ramayana.

As Air Force One flew Trump and his delegation out of New Delhi, Muslim families huddled in a mosque in the city's northeast, praying that Hindu mobs wouldn't burn it down.

"After forcing their way inside the homes, they went on a rampage and started beating people and breaking household items," Khan said of the mobs, adding that he and his family had to run and take shelter inside a mosque that he said was guarded by thousands of Muslim men.

“I don’t know if our house was burned or not, but when we were running away we heard them asking people to pour kerosene and burn everything down,” Khan said.

Some of the dead had bullet wounds, according to Sunil Kumar, medical director of the Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital.

Others came to the hospital with gunshot and stab wounds and head injuries.

Among them was Mohammad Sameer, 17, who was being treated for a gunshot wound to his chest.

Speaking to the Associated Press after having an operation, Sameer said he was standing on his family’s apartment terrace watching Hindu mobs enter Mustafabad when he was shot in the chest.

“When Sameer was shot, I took him on my shoulders and ran downstairs,” said the boy’s father, Mohammad Akram. “But when the mob saw us, they beat me and my injured son. He was bleeding very badly. While they were beating with sticks, they kept on chanting ‘Jai Shri Ram’ slogans and threatened to barge inside our homes.”

Akram said he managed to get his son into a vehicle, but they were stopped several times by Hindus demanding they pull their pants down to show whether they were circumcised before they managed to escape from the area and reach the emergency room. Muslims are generally circumcised, while Hindus are not.

The violence drew sharp reactions from US lawmakers, with Rep. Rashida Tlaib, a Democrat from Michigan, tweeting, “This week, Trump visited India but the real story should be the communal violence targeting Muslims in Delhi right now.”

Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan condemned the killing of Muslims, saying: “Now 200 million Muslims in India are being targeted. The world community must act now.”

Trump told reporters that he had heard about the violence but had not discussed it with Modi. Instead, Trump gloated about his reception in India.

India has been rocked by violence since Parliament approved the citizenship law in December. Opponents have said the country is moving toward a religious citizenship test, but Trump declined to comment on it.

“I don’t want to discuss that. I want to leave that to India and hopefully they’re going to make the right decision for the people,” he said. —Sheikh Saaliq and Emily Schmall, Associated Press. Ashok Sharma and Shonal Ganguly in New Delhi, and Munir Ahmed in Islamabad, Pakistan, contributed to this report.