

Stampede at Israeli Religious Festival Kills 45, Hurts Dozens

A stampede at a religious festival attended by tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews in northern Israel killed at least 45 people and injured about 150 early Friday, medical officials said. It was one of the country's deadliest civilian disasters.

The stampede began when large numbers of people thronged a narrow tunnel-like passage during the event, according to witnesses and video footage. People began falling on top of each other near the end of the walkway, as they descended slippery metal stairs, witnesses said.

One of the injured, Avraham Leibe, told Israeli public broadcaster Kan that a crush of people trying to descend the mountain caused a "general bedlam" on a slippery metal slope followed by stairs. "Nobody managed to halt," he said from a hospital bed. "I saw one after the other fall."

Video footage showed large numbers of people, most of them black-clad ultra-Orthodox men, squeezed in the tunnel. Initial reports and witnesses said police barricades had prevented people from exiting quickly.

The stampede occurred during the celebrations of Lag BaOmer at Mount Meron, the first mass religious gathering to be held legally since Israel lifted nearly all restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic. The country has seen cases plummet since launching one of the world's most successful vaccination campaigns late last year.

Lag BaOmer draws tens of thousands of people, most of them ultra-Orthodox Jews, each year to honor Rabbi Shimon Bar

Yochai, a 2nd century sage and mystic who is believed to be buried there. Large crowds traditionally light bonfires, pray and dance as part of the celebrations.

This year, media estimated the crowd at about 100,000 people.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who briefly visited Mount Meron around midday Friday, said it was "one of the worst disasters that has befallen the state of Israel" and offered condolences to the families. He said Sunday would be a day of national mourning.

Netanyahu was jeered by dozens of ultra-Orthodox protesters, who blamed the government and police for the tragedy.

Velvel Brevda, a rabbi who witnessed the stampede, accused police of putting up barriers that had prevented people from leaving through exits that were usually open in past years.

"Where should we leave from?" he said. "And the officers who were there couldn't care less."

He said the government was responsible for the deaths of "beautiful holy Jews that were killed here for no reason whatsoever, just to prove a point that they're in charge of this place instead of the Orthodox Jews being in charge."

At least 45 people were killed, according to the Israeli Health Ministry, with four people remaining in critical condition. In the immediate aftermath of the stampede, rescue workers collected the bodies, wrapped them in white covers and laid them side by side on the ground at the site.

Bodies were later taken to Israel's central forensic pathology institute for identification.

Efforts were still under way to identify some of the victims and connect families with missing relatives. In the night from Thursday to Friday, cell phone coverage around Mount Meron had collapsed for hours and emergency hotlines were overwhelmed

with phone calls.

In the overwhelmingly ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak, near Tel Aviv, officials were working with healthcare workers to connect the families of the missing. "The picture is slowly becoming clearer," Kivi Hess, a municipal spokesman, told Channel 13 TV.

In a race against time, a number of funerals were to be held before sundown Friday, the start of the Jewish Sabbath when burials do not take place. The country's figurehead president, Reuven Rivlin, lit 45 memorial candles to honor the dead.

The death toll at Mount Meron exceeded the 44 people killed in a 2010 forest fire. That had previously been believed to be the deadliest civilian tragedy in the country's history.

Zaki Heller, spokesman for the Magen David Adom rescue service, said 150 people had been hurt in the stampede.

Heller told Israel Army Radio that "no one had ever dreamed" something like this could happen. "In one moment, we went from a happy event to an immense tragedy," he said.

The Justice Ministry said the police's internal investigations department was launching a probe into possible criminal misconduct by officers.

The deadly stampede was also bound to have political reverberations at a time of great uncertainty following an inconclusive March election, the fourth in two years.

Netanyahu has so far been unsuccessful in forming a governing coalition, and his time for doing so runs out early next week. His political rivals, including former allies bent on ending his 12-year rule, will then get a chance to try to cobble together an alliance from a patchwork of left-wing, centrist and hawkish parties.

Netanyahu needs the continued support of ultra-Orthodox

parties, his long-time allies, if he wants to keep faint hopes alive of staying in power.

Israeli media reported Friday that earlier this month, Netanyahu assured ultra-Orthodox politicians in a meeting that the Lag BaOmer celebrations would take place with few limitations.

The reports said this decision was supported by Cabinet ministers and police, despite objections by health officials who warned of a risk of renewed coronavirus infections.

Last year, observances on Mount Meron were limited due to the pandemic.

At the start of this year's celebrations, Public Security Minister Amir Ohana, police chief Yaakov Shabtai and other top officials visited the event and met with police, who had deployed 5,000 extra forces to maintain order.

Condolences were sent by foreign leaders and diplomats, including the U.S. charge d'affaires. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote on Twitter that his "thoughts are with the Israeli people and those who have lost loved ones in this tragedy."

The European Union conveyed "deepest condolences to families and friends of the victims" and wished a speedy recovery to the injured. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said his country stands by Israel after the "terrifying news from Mount Meron." {eoa}

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