Death toll climbs in India's caste war

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34 killed in massacre by private militia

A light drizzle dampened the smouldering funeral pyres of 34 low-caste villagers yesterday as a private militia, financed by upper-caste landlords, took responsibility for killing them a day earlier as part of continuing violence over India's ancient system of social hierarchy.

"This is the beginning of the Mahabharat. We cannot say when this will end," said villager Satendra Paswan, 35, referring to the mythical war between two rival families that is one of India's best known epics. The Mahabharat ends with the annihilation of one of the clans.

Police raided several hideouts in Bihar state belonging to the banned Ranvir Sena militia and arrested 11 people late Saturday and yesterday, the Press Trust of India news agency quoted Inspector-General of Police Neelmani as saying. The police official uses a single name.

The group issued a statement yesterday that blamed state Labour Minister Raj Ballav Yadav and B.K. Mandal, a top police officer, for last week's massacre of 12 upper-caste landlords and said it had taken revenge on the villagers.

"We have been forced to kill lower-caste people because of the state government's discrimination against a particular caste," the statement said. Rabri Devi, the top elected official of the state, belongs to a lower caste.

About 83 per cent of India's billion people believe in Hinduism, which classifies its adherents into a hierarchy of four major castes. In recent years, the government has launched efforts to educate members of lower castes and bring equal rights, and more people are challenging the status of the higher castes.

Caste-related killings are quite common in Bihar state between the Ranvir Sena and communist guerrillas belonging to the People's War Group and the Maoist Communist Centre, who say they represent the lower castes. Revenge attacks are often carried out against villagers and scores die each year.

Nearly 500 black-garbed gunmen stormed Miapur village in Aurangabad district before dawn Saturday and fought a 2½-hour gun battle until the villagers ran out of ammunition.

The militia then executed a young girl, seven boys, 19 women and seven old men, Police Superintendent M.V. Rao said. Eighteen others were wounded and were being treated yesterday at two government hospitals.

Miapur, a village of mud and thatch huts accessible only by foot, was quiet yesterday, except for occasional wails of agony coming from bereaved women huddled inside their homes. Silent, angry men dressed in white -- the Hindu colour of mourning -- performed the last rituals for the dead.

Two innocuous heaps of smouldering ash were all that remained of the 34 victims. Wisps of smoke still rose from the ashes, 15 hours after the victims were cremated according to Hindu rites.