

Outrage as 64 infants die at Indian hospital

INDIA

Gorakhpur

A key ally of prime minister Narendra Modi is facing calls for his resignation after at least 64 children died at a government hospital in northern India that suffered oxygen shortages.

Yogi Adityanath, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state where the deaths occurred, visited the hospital Sunday as angry relatives rushed to the scene demanding answers.

The deaths occurred over six days, with Indian media reporting that 30 children died Thursday and Friday because of a lack of oxygen on the children's wards.

Suppliers' bills had allegedly not been paid, leading to a shortage that saw panicked families using artificial manual breathing bags to help their loved ones.

Local officials have conceded there was a disruption to the oxygen supply at the hospital in Gorakhpur, but insist the deaths were caused by encephalitis and other illnesses, not a lack of available oxygen.

"We are confident that none of the lives were lost because of this episode," a senior government health official in Gorakhpur told AFP on Sunday on condition of anonymity.

But victims' families have disputed this, describing the panic and chaos as patients began struggling from a sudden lack of oxygen. "As soon as we reached the hospital, we were handed a small pump and told to keep pumping. I did so for over three-and-a-half hours," one victim's father, Shailendra Gupta, was quoted by Sunday's *Indian Express* as saying. "The next day, we were informed that he was dead."

Resignation calls

Gorakhpur's police commissioner Anil Kumar told AFP on Sunday that 11 more children had died at the hospital on Saturday.

"But I reiterate, they were not due to lack of oxygen supply," he said.

Doctors admitted that the oxygen supply had been disrupted for a couple of hours late Thursday, but said no deaths had occurred at that time.

The hospital's breakdown of the death toll showed a jump Thursday when 23 infants died, including 14 babies at its neo-natal unit.

The head of the hospital was stood down pending an inquiry into the oxygen shortage, which allegedly stemmed from nearly \$100,000 in overdue bills, some dating back to November.

AFP