

Strict crowd-control measures for Sabarimala

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Strict controls will be imposed on the movement of devotees at Sabarimala on the day of sighting of the Makara Jyoti, the ultimate event of the annual pilgrimage to the Lord Ayyappa temple, to ensure devotees' safety in the context of the gruesome stampede at Pullumedu on January 14 last in which 102 pilgrims were killed.

A meeting of the high-level committee on Sabarimala the other day decided to bar entry of pilgrims from Pampa, the base camp, to Sannidhanam, the adobe of Lord Ayyappa at the hilltop temple on the day of Makara Jyoti, falling on January 15 this year, during pilgrims' return downhill after sighting the sacred flame.

As per the decision, pilgrims will not be allowed to proceed from Pampa to Sannidhanam in the afternoon of the day of the ultimate event of the pilgrimage. Movement from Pampa to Sannidhanam would be allowed only after 10.30 pm that day.

“Pilgrims moving up towards Sannidhanam when devotees are coming down from there is indeed a serious security concern,” said K Jayakumar, Devaswom Secretary and head of the high-level committee.

The tragedy at Pullumedu, a grassy summit falling under the Periyar Tiger Reserve in Idukki district, had occurred on the night of January 14 when thousands of pilgrims were rushing downhill after beholding the Makara Jyoti. All the victims were pilgrims from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

The committee also decided not to allow pilgrims to use treetops and rooftops for beholding the Makara Jyoti, the sacred flame that would

flicker above the distant Ponnambalamedu hills on the eve of the Makara month of Malayalam calendar. The Police and Forest departments would be asked to ensure that nobody broke this rule.

The decision of the high-level committee is in accordance with the 42-point guideline given by the Director General of Police to avert disasters like the one that occurred at Pullumedu in the last season. The DGP's order has clearly listed the various steps to be taken to avoid over-crowding of pilgrims.

The DGP has issued instructions for installing public address systems at all important places to avoid spread of rumours. As per the guidelines, vehicular traffic to Pullumedu should be avoided totally. Uncontrolled vehicular movement and improper parking were said to be one of the main factors that had led to the Pullumedu disaster.

At the same time, a closed circuit surveillance camera network with 16 cameras was installed at Bhandaram, the temple treasury, and Sannidhanam over the last weekend, sources said. All infra-red cameras could capture visuals within one-km radius even in low light, the claimed. The cameras could also turn 360 degrees and record visuals of up to 60 days.

The visuals recorded by the cameras would be available at the offices of the police and the Vigilance of the Travancore Devaswom Board, in charge of temple administration, at Sabarimala for examination by the authorities.

Sources also said that LCD monitors would be installed at all important spots on the various paths leading to the Lord Ayyappa temple for providing instructions to devotees during emergency situations. They said instructions would be provided in various languages.

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