

Nearly 100 Indian pupils in hospital after eating school meal

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Nearly 100 Indian schoolchildren were hospitalised with suspected food poisoning Thursday after eating a free midday meal at a government-run school near Mumbai, officials said, adding that 13 were in a critical condition.

Most of the children at the rural primary school fell ill after the lunch of rice and pulses.

"Ninety-seven have been admitted to hospital, a few of them are critical," Shrikrishna Kokate, deputy police chief of Palghar district in the western state of Maharashtra, told AFP.

Hospital officials said 247 students were initially brought for treatment late afternoon after they complained of nausea and started vomiting.

"Thirteen are critical but out of danger. More than 140 were discharged after medical screening. The rest are undergoing treatment," Ashok Khandagle, a doctor attending the sick children told AFP.

He said the symptoms point towards food poisoning, adding samples have been sent for tests to a laboratory in Mumbai.

The ill students are aged between six and 14.

Police said they also have sent teams to the school to take samples of food—a mixture of rice and pulses—served to the children.

More than 250 students are enrolled at the Zilla Parishad primary school in Kasa village in Palghar, district about 120 kilometres (74 miles) from the financial capital Mumbai.

Most of the inhabitants of the village are rural tribespeople.

The Indian government's midday meal programme is the world's largest, feeding 120 million children daily in more than a million schools, for many of whom it is their only substantial daily meal.

But the nearly US\$ 2 billion scheme is hampered by corruption and inefficiency.

Last week the federal government said they will form fresh guidelines to improve food safety and hygiene to end a string of cases of poisoning.

Students often fall sick after eating contaminated and poorly prepared food, and in 2013 about two dozen children died in impoverished Bihar state after they ate a meal laced with pesticide.

The government scheme, which started nationally in 2001, is aimed at enticing particularly poor and vulnerable children to attend class instead of languishing at home hungry or helping their parents labour and combat chronic malnutrition.

The 2015 global hunger index (GHI) report ranked India at 20th spot, with a World Bank estimate saying it has the highest number of malnutrition among children, almost double that of sub saharan Africa.

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