



ASIA PACIFIC

That Wasn't a Meteorite That Killed a Man in India, NASA Says

By **CHRISTINE HAUSER** FEB. 9, 2016

The news reported by Indian newspapers and picked up by many outlets around the world was startling: A bus driver was killed and three people were injured after a meteorite hit a college campus on Saturday. If true, it would have been the first scientifically confirmed report in history of someone being killed by a meteorite impact.

By Tuesday, however, the story appeared to be fizzling as scientific experts weighed in.

The early reports included images of a crater, five feet deep and two feet wide. Witnesses described hearing an explosion, and the police recovered a black, pockmarked stone from the site, in southeast India. The chief minister of the state, Jayalalithaa Jayaram, promised compensation for the families of the driver, who was hit by debris, and for the other three people, *The Times of India* reported.

At the college in the Tamil Nadu district of Vellore, the driver, identified only as Kamaraj, died of his injuries after window panes in the engineering building and on several buses shattered, officials there told the local media.

Scientists from the Indian Institute of Astrophysics were analyzing samples of the rock provided by the police.

“Considering that there was no prediction of a meteorite shower and there was no meteorite shower observed, this certainly is a rare phenomena if it is a meteorite,” said Prof. G.C. Anupama, the dean of the institute, in a telephone interview Tuesday.

But NASA scientists in the United States were more emphatic, saying in a public statement that the photographs posted online were more consistent with “a land based explosion” than with something from space.

Lindley Johnson, NASA’s planetary defense officer, said in an email that a death by meteorite impact was so rare that one has never been scientifically confirmed in recorded history. “There have been reports of injuries, but even those were extremely rare before the Chelyabinsk event three years ago,” she said, referring to a 2013 episode in Russia.

In addition, meteorites are often cool to the touch when they land, and the object recovered from the site in India weighed only a few grams and appeared to be a fragment of a common earth rock.

Deaths and injuries by meteorites are tracked by the International Comet Quarterly, which notes the locations and sizes of meteorites. Some smash through houses, kill animals and spatter buildings.

But deaths have been hard to confirm. In 1908 in Tunguska, Siberia, an apparent “airblast” of an object entering Earth’s atmosphere leveled hundreds of square miles of forest and killed two men and hundreds of reindeer. But no meteorites were recovered, the quarterly said.

There are reports of people’s limbs being amputated by meteorites, of farm animals being killed by them and of meteorites crashing through the roofs of houses. In 1954, a woman in Sylacauga, Ala., was hit by a particle from

a meteorite that fell through the roof of her house. The object weighed nine pounds.

Meteorites are fragments spawned from meteors — they are basically pieces of space rock. In one of the largest recent events, meteorites fell in Chelyabinsk from a meteor that hit Earth’s atmosphere in February 2013. About 1,200 people — 200 of them children — were injured, mostly by glass that exploded into schools and workplaces, according to Russia’s Interior Ministry.

Michael McPhate contributed reporting.