India orders medical safety task force after rape protests

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India’s Supreme Court on Tuesday ordered a national task force to examine how to bolster security for health care workers after the “horrific” rape and murder of a doctor sparked medical strikes and furious protests.  
  
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The discovery of the 31-year-old doctor’s bloodied body at a state-run hospital in the eastern city of Kolkata on August 9 has stoked nationwide anger at the chronic issue of violence against women.  
  
Doctors’ associations from government-run hospitals in many cities across India have launched multiple strikes that cut non-essential services, with protests in their second week.  
  
Demonstrators marched through Kolkata on Tuesday, holding up signs demanding “justice”, while the country’s top court issued orders in the capital New Delhi.  
  
“The brutality of the sexual assault and the nature of the crime have shocked the conscience of the nation,” the three-judge bench said in its order, calling the details “horrific”.  
  
Chief Justice D. Y. Chandrachud read out the order, which called for the formation of a “national task force” of top doctors to prepare a plan to prevent violence in healthcare facilities and draw up an “enforceable national protocol” for safe working conditions.  
  
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“The lack of institutional safety norms at medical establishments, against both violence and sexual violence against medical professionals, is a matter of serious concern”, the court order read.  
  
“With few or no protective systems to ensure their safety, medical professionals have become vulnerable to violence”, it added.  
  
“Lack of security personnel in medical care units is more of a norm than an exception.”  
  
The murdered doctor was found in the teaching hospital’s seminar hall, suggesting she had gone there for a break during a 36-hour-long shift.  
  
An autopsy confirmed she had been sexually assaulted and, in a petition to the Kolkata High Court, her parents said they suspected their daughter was gang raped.  
  
Many of the protests have been led by doctors and other health care workers but have also been joined by tens of thousands of ordinary Indians demanding action.  
  
“As more and more women join the work force in cutting edge areas of knowledge and science, the nation has a vital stake in ensuring safe and dignified conditions of work,” the court said.  
  
“The nation cannot await a rape or murder for real changes on the ground”, it added.