

26 KILLED ON SECOND DAY OF INDIA'S GENERAL ELECTION.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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LUDHIANA, India, Nov 24, Reuter - At least 26 people were killed on Friday on the second day of India's general election, taking the death toll in the three-stage poll in the world's largest democracy to 60.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi meanwhile brought his campaign to a close on Friday in the industrial city of Ludhiana in northern Punjab state where Sikh extremists have killed thousands of people in their fight for a separate homeland.

Shots were fired when opposition leader Vishwanath Pratap Singh made a campaign stop in his own northern Uttar Pradesh state constituency of Fatehpur. He told reporters three shots were fired, apparently into the air.

Gandhi's Congress party and Singh's Janata Dal party have each accused the other of using violence and vote-rigging in the election, which began on Wednesday and ends on Sunday.

Both sides said they were confident of winning an overall majority in the 545-seat parliament and there were no immediate indications of whether election-eve opinion polls predicting a Congress defeat were correct.

Indian news agencies reported five poll-related killings in Uttar Pradesh and one in West Bengal state in the east. But the worst clashes were in northern Bihar state where 20 people were killed, including five hacked to death in one village.

The new deaths brought to 60 the number of people killed in election violence since the polls opened on Wednesday.

Most of India's 498 million electorate, the world's biggest, voted on Wednesday and Friday. The rest -- those living in Punjab, Sikkim and parts of Bihar -- vote on Sunday. The first results should be announced shortly after polling ends.

Security was tight at Gandhi's rally in Ludhiana, with those attending being checked by metal detectors. Sikh bodyguards killed Gandhi's mother and predecessor Indira Gandhi five years ago and he has been closely guarded ever since.

Many of those who went to the rally gave up waiting in the rain for Gandhi, who arrived late, and the crowd he eventually addressed was small. The weather forced the cancellation of a second rally.

Gandhi has been addressing up to 20 meetings a day since the campaign began, criss-crossing the country by plane and helicopter. Congress workers have been embarrassed by the low turnout at some of them.

By comparison Singh has run an austere campaign stressing the difference between his pledge to bring honesty back to Indian politics and Gandhi's alleged lavish spending.

Singh, whose Janata Dal spearheads the five-party National Front opposition alliance, told an impromptu roadside news conference in Fatehpur: "Congress will be routed.

"I don't think the Congress party will continue to keep (Gandhi). He has brought down the Congress government," said the adopted son of a minor princely family and former Gandhi ally.

Gandhi's main campaign theme was been to dismiss the National Front alliance as unable to form a government from its disparate elements.

Congress is generally expected to hold its own in the south, but surveys suggested heavy losses in the northern Hindi-speaking region which dominates parliament.

Gandhi needs to win well in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the Hindi-speaking northern heartland. The two states together elect 139 members of parliament.



Pollsters believe Gandhi has been damaged in the two states by a surge of Hindu-Moslem violence over a sacred site in Uttar Pradesh claimed by both faiths.

Interviews with voters emerging from polling booths in Patna, capital of Bihar state where the most ferocious religious violence occurred last month, suggested they were correct.

Most said either they voted for the Hindu revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which has a seat-sharing deal with the National Front, or for the Communist Party of India (CPI).

"The CPI will get most of the Moslem vote, 90 to 95 per cent," said Rashid Akbar, a Moslem, after he voted.

"Congress has lost the Hindu vote," said flower seller Raj Kumar Bhagar, a Hindu.

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