

FOCUS-Hindu leader says he target of India bombs.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, Feb 14 (Reuters) - The leader of India's main opposition party said on Saturday he was the target of a series of car bomb blasts that killed at least 31 people, wounded up to 100, and triggered rioting and arson in the city of Coimbatore.

The violence was the worst to hit the campaign for India's February 16-March 7 national election.

Curfew was clamped on the textile city in south India's Tamil Nadu state and troops were sent in to quell rioting that broke out after the blasts. Authorities banned gatherings of more than five people and police were ordered to shoot looters on sight.

The 12 bombs went off around the time Lal Krishna Advani, president of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was scheduled to speak at an election rally.

Coimbatore is scheduled to vote in the second phase of the election on February 22. Voting for two-fifths of the 543 seats at stake in parliament's lower house will take place next Monday.

"The first blast took place barely 200 feet from the stage. It is only because I reached Coimbatore late that I was not present at the spot," Advani said in a statement.

"Had the meeting started at the scheduled time, the consequences would have been unimaginable."

India's President K.R. Narayanan said in a statement the mayhem was clearly an attempt to disrupt the election process.

"Let the patrons and perpetrators of these malignant acts not underestimate the collective strength of our nation," he said.

Advani said he had visited the injured in hospital. "There were dead bodies lying all over the place. The entrance was splattered with blood and gore. The cries and wails of the relatives of the victims were unbearable," he said.

The BJP, which went into India's national election a clear frontrunner, has seen its strong lead in opinion polls eroded by its rival Congress party's star campaigner Sonia Gandhi.

"In this hour of shock and grief, I reiterate the BJP's commitment to create a riot-free and terrorism-free India," said Advani, apparently with an eye on the elections.

The BJP has sought to water down its perceived anti-Moslem bias by wooing the country's biggest religious minority. "I especially asked my colleagues not to discriminate between Hindus and Moslems while organising relief," Advani said.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) said the Tamil Nadu government had declared illegal two Moslem organisations, the Al-Umma and the Jihad Committee, and barred them from any activities.

"The situation is pretty bad. There is rioting and looting going on some areas," a police official who did not want to be identified told Reuters by telephone from Coimbatore.

Eyewitnesses said at least six people died in the first blast in the city's R.S. Puram district where Advani was due to speak at about 3.45 p.m. (1015 GMT).

Three nurses were killed in a second blast outside the Government Medical College hospital. More bombs exploded across the city, including at a bus terminus and a railway station.

Karuppanna Pillai, Dean of the Medical College, told Reuters by telephone that 22 bodies and 35 injured people had been brought to his hospital by 8.15 p.m. (1445 GMT).



"The condition of 10 of the injured is serious," Pillai said. "They are suffering from multiple injuries and burns. We are trying our best, but the death toll may rise."

A transport company official in the city, who asked not to be named, said some shops were set on fire and the glass panes of four or five buses damaged in incidents of stone throwing.

The election campaign has been marred by sporadic violence.

Paramilitary troops have been rushed to dozens of sensitive areas. At least two dozen have people have died in scattered violence in the insurgency-racked northeast.

Monday's polling for 222 seats will be followed by voting on February 22, 23, 28 and March 7.

Two snow-bound constituencies in the north of the country will go to the polls in June.

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