

FOCUS-Indian polls start "calm and confident".By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

662 words

16 February 1998

Reuters News

English

(c) 1998 Reuters Limited

NEW DELHI, Feb 16 (Reuters) - Indian voters queued up early on Monday to cast their votes as the world's largest democracy launched the first phase of a mid-term election that is widely predicted to return another hung parliament.

At least 250 million adults are eligible to vote on Monday for 222 seats in the 543-seat lower house of parliament.

About 100,000 paramilitary soldiers have been deployed in sensitive regions to head off threats of sectarian violence in some areas and guerrilla attacks in others.

The tightened security followed a bloody weekend of riots and bombing that left more than 70 people dead.

"We are calm and confident," Chief Election Commissioner M.S. Gill said late on Sunday. "Everything is on the rails. Election parties and security forces have moved everywhere."

Sonia Gandhi, the widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, who has transformed the fortunes of her Congress party with her energetic campaigning, was among early voters at a New Delhi booth that was ringed with heavy security.

"After the election I will answer your questions," an unsmiling Gandhi told the huge crowd of reporters.

Wearing a blue sari, she arrived in a convoy of three cars to and spent a few minutes inside the dilapidated room in a government building where the station was set up.

The Indian army was called in to field "quick reaction teams" in the sensitive northeastern state of Assam, where Maoist insurgents have threatened a boycott of voting for the state's 14 parliamentary seats.

Voting began at 7 a.m. (0130 GMT) to choose 222 of the 543 members in parliament's lower house, the Lok Sabha. More voting will take place on February 22, 23, 28 and March 7; two snowbound constituencies in the north will vote only in June.

"We are receiving messages from officials around the country. Polling has begun peacefully," said an Election Commission official who asked not to be identified. "No incident of violence has so far been reported."

Voting in the cosmopolitan South Madras constituency in southern India's Tamil Nadu state was brisk. Mostly middle-aged people -- businessmen, bureaucrats and retired civil servants -- lined up to cast their ballots.

Enthusiastic voters in Mayur Vihar in east Delhi set off firecrackers to mark the start of the voting process.

"I have cast my vote. All I want is a good government from whoever comes," said Ajay Kumar, a university student.

"I have cast my vote. But I can definitely say it is going to be a coalition government," said Shamim Ahmed, 32, at a polling booth in the New Delhi constituency.

Opinion polls have predicted the election will throw up India's second hung parliament in as many years. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party is expected to win the most seats along with its allies, but to fall short of the majority required to form the next government.

Political leaders traded bitter accusations on Sunday over the outrages in Coimbatore, a textile town in Tamil Nadu state, where police said a total of 17 bombs took at least 48 lives over the weekend.

The bombers' targets included a hospital, a rail station and a bus terminal. Riots and arson followed until police restored order with a warning that they would shoot rioters on sight.



In the aftermath, police swooped on a militant hideout early on Sunday and said six suspects were killed by their own bomb, which blew up as they tried to throw it during the raid.

The Press Trust of India reported that one person was injured in another blast in Coimbatore on Sunday evening. Police seized two bags of explosives. More than 200 people have been detained.

The Coimbatore violence was the worst to hit the campaign for India's general election.

At least 19 people were killed in pre-election violence elsewhere in India on Sunday.

(c) Reuters Limited 1998

Document lba0000020010926du2g03zew



The violence was the worst to date that has marred the campaign for national elections, to be held from May 13 through March 7.

A curfew was imposed in the textile city in southern 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 L.K. Advani, president of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was scheduled to speak at an election rally.

Coimbatore is to vote in the second phase of the election on Feb. 22.

"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."

President K.K. Narayanan said the bombings clearly were meant to disrupt the election process.

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

Advani said, "In this hour of shock and grief, I reiterate the BJP's commitment to create a safe and terrorism-free India."

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

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

The Press Trust of India said the Tamil Nadu government had banned two Muslim organizations, the Al-Umma and the Jihad Committees.

"The situation is pretty bad. There is rioting and looting going on in many areas," a police officer who did not want to be identified said by telephone from Coimbatore.

Eyewitnesses said at least six people died in the first blast in the city's K.S. Puram district, where Advani was due to speak at about 3:45 p.m.

Three people were killed in a second blast outside the Government Medical College hospital. More bombs exploded across the city, including on a bus terminal and a railroad station.

Karuppanna Pillai, dean of the medical college, said that 22 people died and 25 injured people had been brought to his hospital by 8:15 p.m.