

**TROOPS AT BATTLE STATIONS AS INDIA'S PUNJAB GOES TO THE POLLS.**By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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CHANDIGARH, India, Nov 26, Reuter - India's bloody general election entered its final stage on Sunday with an exit poll from earlier voting predicting that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi faces major losses.

The survey, conducted by the independent India Today magazine, forecast neither Gandhi nor the opposition National Front alliance would get a clear majority needed to form a government without the support of smaller groups.

As the election -- one of the bloodiest in India's history -- entered its final phase, extraordinary security measures were in force in Punjab, the northern state savaged by years of Sikh extremist violence.

"We've really gone in for a massive security cover," Surinder Kapur, Punjab's chief electoral officer, said in an interview.

Sikkim state also votes on Sunday along with about half of Bihar, where many of the more than 100 killings since elections began on Wednesday have taken place.

Hundreds of people died last month in Hindu-Moslem riots in Bihar, one of India's poorest and most backward states.

Counting for most of the 524 seats being contested begins on Sunday, but it has been delayed for a day in Gandhi's own Amethi constituency.

The Election Commission ordered re-polling on Monday in 97 polling booths after a special investigation team found evidence of election rigging last Wednesday.

The order, strongly resisted by the ruling Congress party, will be an embarrassment for Gandhi, who is already under pressure from the poor performance of his party.

According to the India Today poll, Congress is unlikely to win more than 215 seats and the National Front will probably end up with around 193.

"This exit poll suggests that when the results come in during the next two or three days, for the first time in its history India will have a "hung" parliament with no single party or front having a clear majority," it said.

In Punjab some polling stations in districts bordering Pakistan were so heavily guarded on Sunday they resembled wartime bunkers.

Heavily-armed troops have been placed atop the polling booths behind sandbag emplacements, Kaur said.

"They have been equipped with all kinds of weapons," he said. "We're anticipating terrorist raids on polling booths."

India accuses Pakistan of giving shelter to and arming Sikh extremists fighting for a separate homeland in Punjab, a charge Pakistan denies.

About 45,000 paramilitary troops have been sent to Punjab to reinforce more than 50,000 men already there and all leave has been cancelled for Punjab's 45,000 ordinary policemen.

In the prosperous agricultural state the killing goes on daily among both Sikhs and the state's Hindu minority, despite two-and-a-half years of direct rule from New Delhi.

Year in violence sparked by the Sikh campaign for an independent state they call Khalistan.

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