

## International

# World's biggest election tests Modi's hold on power in India

## Heavy turnout across 20 states on first day of election

**NEW DELHI:** Tens of millions of Indians joined nationwide queues yesterday to give their verdict on nationalist prime minister Narendra Modi as the world's biggest election started amid deadly clashes. Election officials reported a heavy turnout across the 20 states taking part in the first day of the massive exercise which involves 900 million eligible voters and will take nearly six weeks to complete. While the 68-year-old Modi remains popular because of his tough stance on national security, he is under pressure over unemployment and controversial economic measures.

Insults and fake news have surged on social media in the run-up to the poll as Modi's right wing Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and the opposition Congress party stake their claims. On the ground, security forces were on high alert and two members of regional parties were killed in clashes outside a polling station in Tadipatri, Andhra Pradesh state, media reports said. After five people including a local lawmaker were killed by a roadside bomb planted by suspected Maoist rebels on Tuesday, the insurgents were blamed for two voting day blasts in Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra states.

Tens of thousands of armed police, paramilitaries and troops guarded polling stations in

Jammu and Kashmir which is in the grip of an insurrection that took India to the verge of a new war with neighboring Pakistan less than two months ago. Thousands of parties and candidates are running for office in the seven separate days of voting in 543 constituencies up to May 19. Final results will be released on May 23.

Some 1.1 million electronic voting machines are being taken around the country for the votes, with some transported through jungles and carried up mountains, including to a hamlet near the Chinese border with just one voter. About 142 million people were eligible for the first day of voting. Polling stations in northeastern states like Arunachal Pradesh bordering China were the first to open, followed by parts of Bihar in the north.

In Assam in the northeast, queues started forming well before voting began, including many of the 84 million first-time voters who could play a decisive role in the outcome. "It's a great feeling to cast the vote, which makes me a part of the democratic system and makes me responsible for electing a good leader," Anurag Baruah, 23, said.

Modi appealed in an early-morning tweet to his 46.8 million followers to "turn out in record



**RAE BAREILLY, Uttar Pradesh:** Indian Congress party senior leader Sonia Gandhi, right, along with her son, Indian National Congress party president Rahul Gandhi, left, leaves after filing her nomination papers for the forthcoming general election at a district court in Rae Bareilly.—AFP

numbers. He swept to power in 2014 with the biggest landslide in 30 years. Critics, however, accuse him of imposing a Hindu agenda, emboldening attacks on Muslims and low-caste Dalits, re-writing school textbooks and re-

naming cities. Modi has simplified the tax code and made doing business easier, but some promises have fallen short. Thousands of indebted farmers have committed suicide in recent years.—AFP

## Pakistan takes media, diplomats on visit to Indian strike site

**ISLAMABAD:** Pakistan has escorted a group of foreign journalists and diplomats to the site of an Indian air strike to show that, contrary to Delhi's claims, no infrastructure was damaged, the military spokesman said. The visiting group, which Major General Asif Ghafoor said was mostly based in Delhi, was shown observing a crater in Balakot in video published via Twitter late Wednesday, on the eve of India's massive election.

The group saw the "ground realities" of the strike site, Ghafoor said in a caption accompanying the tweet. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has campaigned hard on what he claims is the success of the February 26 strike. Indian officials have claimed up to 250 militants were killed. Pakistan has denied from the start that there was any damage or casualties, with Modi's counterpart Imran Khan framing it as an election ploy.

With the first phase of polls in India's massive election opening Thursday, Modi has styled himself as India's "chowkidar" ("watchman"), and anyone even questioning the action against Pakistan is given short shrift. But independent reporting by multiple local and international outlets who have visited the site found no evidence of a major terrorist training camp or of any infrastructure damage at all. An AFP reporter who visited just hours after the strike

was carried out saw damage only to trees and one mud hut. Local residents have said no one was killed.

The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab said that open-source satellite imagery indicated "only impacts in the wooded area, with no damage being visible to the surrounding structures." The strike was in retaliation to a suicide bombing in Indian-held Kashmir on February 14 that was claimed by a Pakistan-based militant group. It was followed by Pakistani air strikes which hit open space in Indian territory and ignited a dogfight in the skies over the disputed region of Kashmir, the worst confrontation between the nuclear-armed foes in years.

Pakistan said it shot down two Indian war planes, with one falling on the Indian side of the de facto Kashmir border. It captured the pilot of the other, releasing him days later in a bid to defuse tensions. India says just one of its planes was shot down, and claimed that the second plane was a Pakistani F-16 shot down by the Indian air force. Pakistan has denied that claim also, and Foreign Policy has reported that the US had done a count of all Pakistan's F-16s, with none missing. Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since the end of British colonial rule in 1947. Both claim the Himalayan territory in full and have fought two wars over it.—AFP

## Two dead in clashes on first day of India election



**WEST BENGAL:** Indian voters, Shyamal Arjya and Afzal Sheikh are under treatment after they got injured following a clash between political supporters at MJN Hospital in Cooch Behar district during the first phase of general elections in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal.—AFP

**NEW DELHI:** Clashes between followers of rival parties left at least two dead and several injured on the first day of India's huge election yesterday, media reports said. Suspected Maoist rebels also triggered blasts in Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra states in a bid to disrupt voting. Activists of the Telugu Desam Party and the YSR Congress party, regional groups in central Andhra Pradesh state, fought each other outside a polling station in Tadipatri, Firstpost news website reported.

Online videos showed bloodied and injured supporters of the rival parties. Firstpost said a TSP leader, Bhaskar Reddy, and YSR worker Pulla Reddy died in the clashes. It added that two party workers were left in critical condition. The two parties are in contention for 25 parliamentary and 175 Andhra Pradesh state assembly seats being contested yesterday. The rebel attacks in Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra briefly held up polling at one location but no injuries were reported.—AFP