

# Big turnout in Gujarat polls

REUTERS, Ahmedabad

Voters piled into polling stations in India's Gujarat state Thursday in an election seen as a referendum on the Hindu nationalist policies of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party after bloody Hindu-Muslim clashes.

Nearly 10 million people out of about 33 million eligible voters cast their ballots in the first four hours of voting, in an unusually high turnout which political analysts said should help the BJP more than the main opposition Congress party.

"The issue in this election is Muslims versus Hindus," said 38-year-old Hindu chemist Nayan Pathak.

"Hindus feel only the BJP can protect them," he said in the town of Godhra, where 59 Hindus were burned to death when their train was torched by a Muslim mob on February 27.

At least 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were hacked and burned to death across the state in the revenge killings that followed.

The BJP's outgoing chief minister Narendra Modi denied allegations of complicity in the killings of

Muslims, who make up just nine percent of the population.

But he repeatedly referred to Godhra in his campaign, alarming Muslims who fear fresh trouble and say Modi's hard-line Hindu revivalism could spread to the rest of India if he wins.

Muslims were expected to vote overwhelmingly for Congress.

"We are like chickens whose hour of death has come," said cigarette vendor Mohammad Ali Sayeed. "If the BJP win they will do more of this and if they lose they will do it out of anger."

"Either way we are doomed," he said.

"What can I say?" asked Sulaiman Jivanbhai, a farmer in the Muslim village of Shantipura. "The whole world knows what Modi is to us. Why do you force me to say the words?"

On the outskirts of Gujarat's main city Ahmedabad, Muslim voters crowded into a polling station in the slum district of Naroda Patia, newly rebuilt after being burned down in the riots.

Many had fled the state, and discovered on returning to cast their

vote they had not been included on the electoral register.

With the BJP fighting to retain control in the only state over which it still has sole control, Modi has turned the election into a single issue of Hindu revivalism.

He proclaimed at campaign rallies that only he could protect Gujarat's 50 million people from the threat from Islamic Pakistan and the Muslim militants India claims it sponsors.

Islamabad denies helping Muslim militants attack Indian targets in Indian Kashmir and elsewhere in the country.

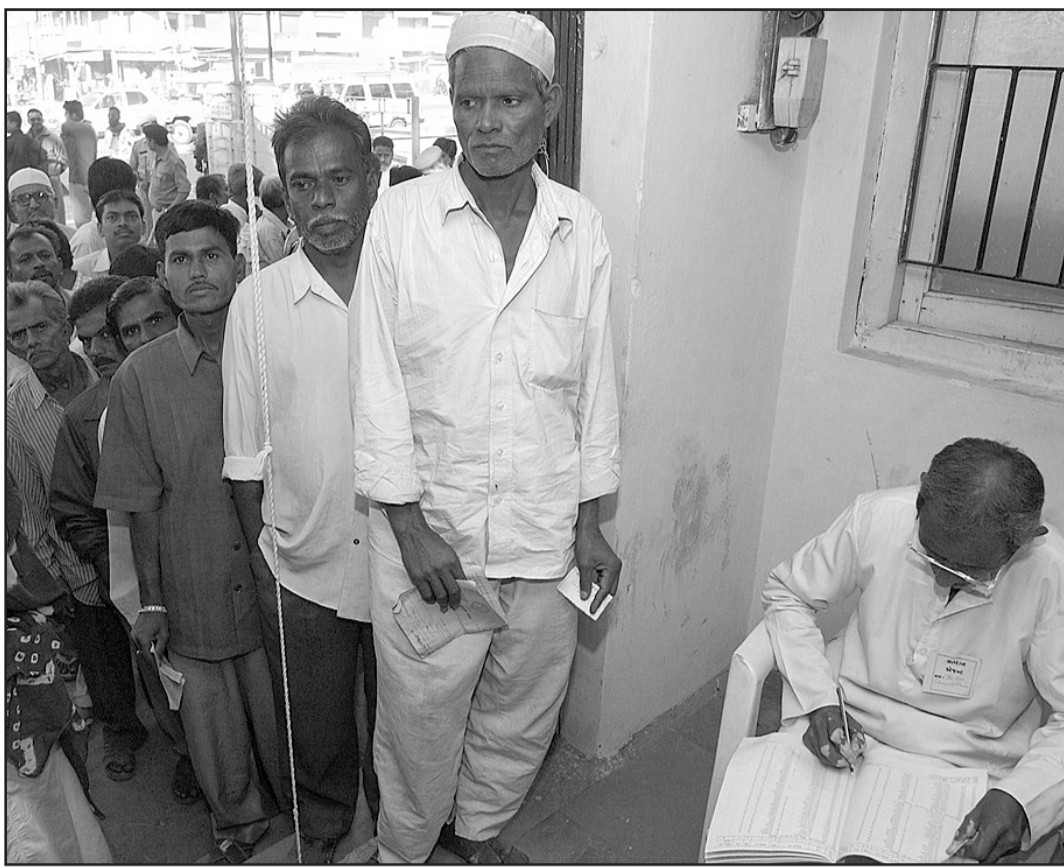
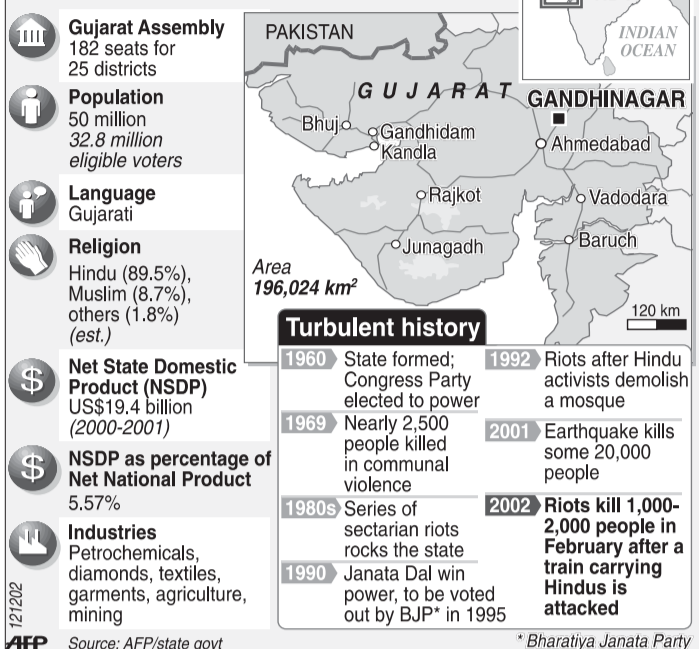
Modi's aides say he is convinced that Pakistan-backed militants drove the Muslim mob to attack the train at Godhra.

But no evidence has been found of this, and critics accuse him of stirring up fear of Muslims in order to win votes.

The poll result will set the tone for the fractious national coalition government which the BJP heads. Victory will strengthen the BJP's hand; defeat could be the beginning of the end as the coalition unravels before national elections due by 2004.

## Gujarat goes to the polls

India's most industrialised state elects a state assembly Thursday under the shadow of communal violence



Voters queue to cast their vote in Naroda Patiya village, a predominantly Muslim area on Thursday in Ahmedabad. Polls opened across India's violence-torn state of Gujarat, where months of religious rioting that killed up to 2,000 people looms large in a ballot likely to affect the course of national politics.

## Explosion rocks Kashmir capital

AFP, Srinagar

Seven Indian soldiers were injured in a cycle-bomb explosion Thursday in this summer capital of Indian-administered Kashmir, police and witnesses said.

They said suspected Islamic militants triggered explosives attached to a bicycle in the Raj Bagh locality of Srinagar early Thursday, which also damaged a security vehicle.

"The injured were rushed to Srinagar's army hospital for treatment," a police spokesman said. Four of the wounded were in critical condition.

The impact of the explosion near a security force camp was felt up to two kilometres (1.5 miles) away. It smashed glass windowpanes of houseboats on the nearby Jehlum river and terrified residents who had just started their day.

## Tiger top guns return home after talks

AFP, Colombo

Top Tamil Tiger rebel leaders returned home Thursday after a two-week stay in Europe where they agreed to a "federal" solution to end Sri Lanka's drawn-out ethnic bloodshed, diplomats said.

The head of the political wing of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), S. P. Thamilselvan, and the group's top military leader Karuna travelled aboard a government helicopter to a rebel-held area in the north of the island.

Peace broker Norway had diplomats on hand at Sri Lanka's only international airport in Colombo to receive the five-member rebel delegation that attended peace talks in Oslo earlier this month.

During the talks, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government agreed

a federal constitution should be the basis for a final political settlement to the conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives in the past three decades.

The political breakthrough was welcomed by the United Nations and the international community, which last month pledged some 70 million dollars in immediate humanitarian aid to the island's war-ravaged northeast.

After the peace talks concluded December 5, the Tigers flew to Switzerland to study the political system there.

The Sri Lankan government and the Tigers are set for several more rounds of peace talks to discuss the degree of devolution of power to minority Tamils as well as the geographic limits and the extent of devolved authority.

## Uproar in Indian parliament over farmer's death

AFP, New Delhi

The lower house of the Indian parliament adjourned in uproar Thursday when agitated opposition members protested against the death of a farmer allegedly shot by police.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had to intervene when protests continued even after the house reassembled.

Media reports have put the number killed Wednesday when police fired on a farmers' demonstration in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh at three.

"According to the newspaper reports, there were three killed but I have contacted Lucknow (the state capital) and I have been told that the police fired in the air," Vajpayee told the agitated house.

"Only one dead body was found 15 kilometers away from the spot. Maybe he was killed in the firing but give us some time. We are collecting the facts," he said, adding the farmers should be getting a higher price for sugarcane.

"I have also heard that the court says we can't pay more. If this is true, then we should all get together and find a solution," Vajpayee added.

## Indian boy wins coveted US Science Award

PTI, New York

India-born Roshan Prabhu, 16, and Juliet Girard, 18, have won a science award for helping to identify a crucial segment of rice genome, which could give a major boost to its production.

The duo, who are students at a Jersey City high school share the prestigious Siemens Westinghouse \$ 100,000 award in the team category.

They were among 17 students who received awards in various field at a ceremony in Washington. They were selected from more than 1,100 entries.

Prabhu and Girard identified the genes that determine the early flowering of rice, a discovery that could increase its cultivation around the world and reduce the need for irrigation.

"If this works out, it could have dramatic consequences for mankind," Albert Hoser, chairman of the Siemens Foundation, said.

Since last summer, they have been working on a rice genome project sponsored by Cornell University, with guidance from their science teacher, Michael Corcoran.

## Sindh provincial assembly sworn in after squabbling

AFP, Karachi

Legislators were sworn in Thursday in Pakistan's southern province of Sindh, with an ally of President Pervez Musharraf likely to take the top slot after weeks of political horse-trading.

The 163 assembly members elected in the October 10 election took their oaths in the provincial capital Karachi, Pakistan's largest city. Some 2,000 people watched on from the packed visitors chambers.

Ali Mohammad Maher, a member of the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), was expected to be elected as the province's chief minister under a deal brokered here Wednesday by Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali, another Musharraf ally.

The assembly was to have been sworn in late last month but it was delayed when the ethnic Muttahida

Qaumi Movement (MQM) balked at supporting the army-backed PML-Q.

The party agreed Wednesday to join government, giving the coalition enough seats to rule without the largest bloc in the assembly, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

The PPP said it would still run a candidate against Maher in the assembly vote for chief minister, expected Monday.

PPP sources said the party was in talks with the Islamist umbrella group, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), which made striking gains nationwide in the October election both in provincial and the federal legislatures.

The MMA took power in the North West Frontier Province and is in a coalition with PML-Q in the province of Baluchistan on the Afghan border.

## 'India can't strengthen SAARC alone'

PTI, New Delhi

India on Thursday said it alone could not strengthen the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and other member countries would have to fulfil their assurances to strengthen the group.

"Strengthening of SAARC is our top priority but it is not possible to do it alone and we require other member countries' cooperation," Minister of State for External Affairs Digvijay Singh said during question hour in Rajya Sabha.

Without naming Pakistan, Singh said some member-nations are not fulfilling their

assurances in economic and other fields to strengthen SAARC.

In reply to another query, the minister said it was true that Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had chosen to skip Diwali celebrations in the country and attended the Indo-ASEAN meeting in Kuala Lumpur to forge greater ties in the region.

He said the declaration brought out after the meeting called for cooperation in fighting terrorism besides strengthening economic ties.

The next Indo-ASEAN meeting will be held in Bali in Indonesia in October 2003, the minister said.

# India says 'no' to more de-escalation steps with Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

India Thursday ruled out any more de-escalation steps with Pakistan until it ends what New Delhi terms "cross-border terrorism" in disputed Kashmir state.

"As cross-border infiltration and terrorist violence has not ended, the rest of the diplomatic and other measures taken against Pakistan are still in place," Junior Foreign Minister Digvijay Singh told the upper house of parliament.

"India's further response would be based on implementation of Pakistan's commitment to end cross-border infiltration and terrorism."

After a deadly militant attack on the Indian parliament last December 13, New Delhi applied a string of diplomatic strictures to Islamabad, and pushed hundreds of thousands of troops into battle-ready positions on the borders with Pakistan.

India claimed the rebels who brought the attack were sponsored by Pakistan, a claim Islamabad vehemently rejects.

The diplomatic penalties includ-

ing snapping train and bus links, placing an overflight ban on Pakistani airlines, recalling its high commissioner (ambassador) from Islamabad and reducing the high commission strength by half.

Following national addresses by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on May 27 and June 6 in which he committed to ending the flow of rebels from Pakistan-administered Kashmir to the Indian zone, India lifted the overflight ban.

On October 16, after assembly elections in Indian Kashmir concluded, New Delhi announced a phased pullback of its troops from the border.

Diplomatic measures, including returning India's envoy and resuming transport links, have yet to resume.

New Delhi also steadfastly refuses to reopen dialogue with Pakistan on the future of Kashmir, despite constant international nudging, saying talks can only be resumed once "terrorism" ends.

In terms of the regional seven-nation SAARC, Singh said the grouping remained India's top priority, but was not its responsibility

alone, hinting that some members were not fulfilling their commitments in economic and other fields.

He did not name Pakistan, which on Monday announced a delay in the 12th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit due to be held in Islamabad next month and gave no new dates.

It claimed India was attempting to sabotage the summit -- a charge New Delhi merely threw back at Islamabad.

India had given mixed signals on whether Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee would attend the summit, accusing Pakistan of delaying implementation of key economic decisions taken at the last summit in Kathmandu.

SAARC, founded in 1985 in Dhaka, comprises Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bhutan.

It has been largely ineffectual due to the constant feuding between its two largest members India and Pakistan, who have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947 and came close to a fourth one this year.



Indian Vice-President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat (L) presents a wheelchair to Vikram Singh (C), a press cameraman who was injured during the December 13, 2001 parliament attack in New Delhi, as his four-year old son (R) looks on during a function in New Delhi on Thursday. The ceremony was staged to pay homage to the victims of the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi on December 13, 2001.

## A year after attack, Indian Parliament is a fortress

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

A year after a sensational terror attack on its high security premises, Indian Parliament has become an impenetrable fortress, making it one of the world's most heavily guarded legislatures.

But even then, MPs find it hard not to feel vulnerable when they relieve the horror of December 13, 2002 that left a total of 14 people dead and almost led to a war between India and Pakistan.

Marking the first anniversary of the attack by five armed gunmen alleged to be Pakistanis, the British-built Parliament building has rapidly aged to the era of guns and gadgets - and its agenda is awash with concerns over terrorism.

The seven-layered security around the sandstone monument and the surrounding complex, meant to prevent even a feather passing through without verification, has certainly increased the distance between lawmakers and the common man.

It is difficult to hark back to the days when senior MPs, including India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, waved at commoners from the steps of the main entrance - now nearly half a kilometre from the thoroughfare and protected by a high wall.

The terror-proof Parliament has new security check posts, smart cards and increased presence of armed personnel apart from the

Watch and Ward personnel who patrol the building.

Personnel of Delhi police and paramilitary forces like the Central Reserve Police Force and Indo-Tibetan Border Police complement the parliament security staff.

At the beginning each session, sniffer dogs, including Alsatians and Labradors, do their mandatory round before the day's business.

Tin sheds at the entrances for frisking have been replaced by permanent structures where visitors and their belongings are virtually turned upside down to sniff out hidden bombs or weapons.

Vijay Kumar Malhotra, a BJP leader, said more security measures were on the cards once the home ministry approved the suggestions of a panel of MPs.

"We want the best possible security that is as unobtrusive as possible," said Malhotra. "There will be more security gadgets and equipment to deal with trauma after any such attack."

The BJP MP, who was in Home Minister LK Advani's parliamentary office in the Parliament building when the terrorists struck, said the incident would remain a "lifelong memory".

He was among the 300-odd MPs who were in Parliament when the five terrorists

stormed the complex at 11.45 pm firing indiscriminately, stunning the country and killing nine security personnel and parliament employees.



People carry a leopard after its capture by forest officials in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam on Wednesday. It is the second leopard to be captured inside the city within three days as deforestation around the city has led to number of leopards entering the city's limits.

## Better Indo-Pak ties hinge on Kashmir solution: Pak FM

AFP, Islamabad

Long-strained relations between Pakistan and India cannot improve until the core dispute of Kashmir is resolved, Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri said Wednesday.

"Pakistan-India relations and prospects of durable peace in the region cannot improve as long as the root cause of tensions -- the Kashmir dispute -- is not resolved," Kasuri told a gathering of editors and columnists here.

Nuclear-capable Pakistan and India have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947, two of them over Kashmir, which is divided between the two and claimed in full by both.

The two countries have repeatedly come close to

another war. In 1999, India launched a full-scale military assault to dislodge Pakistan-backed forces holding key heights in the Indian zone of Kashmir.

Until recently the two countries had hundreds of thousands of troops deployed on their shared borders following an attack a year ago on the Indian parliament, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militant groups.

Kasuri said Pakistan was a peace-loving country and wanted a resumption of dialogue between the two countries to resolve all outstanding disputes including Kashmir.

"I am convinced that, acting in the interest of our people, the governments of Pakistan and India need to find the best medium of commencing a dialogue," he was quoted as saying

by the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan.

Kasuri said India was responsible for the postponement of next month's South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit because it refused to confirm its participation.

Islamabad announced indefinite postponement Monday, saying it would propose fresh dates after consulting other member states and the SAARC secretariat.

India has said Pakistan wants to turn SAARC into a forum on Kashmir and has called instead for discussions on economic cooperation and other regional issues.

SAARC includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.