

NARENDRA MODI

India's nationalist powerhouse

AFP, New Delhi

Stern, sharp and shrewd, Narendra Modi fought his way off the streets to become one of India's most popular and polarising prime ministers.

There is no middle ground between admirers and adversaries of the man -- now running for a second term as leader -- who helped his father run a railway station tea stall before launching his career in nationalist politics.

The 68-year-old makes much of his humble roots while unashamedly portraying himself as the tough guy protecting India's national security and Hindu values, pressing its claims to be the world's rising power.

Doubts have been expressed over his economic reforms. But little mud has stuck and few dispute that "NaMo", as he is known, drives India's national agenda while expertly baiting neighbouring Pakistan and the opposition Congress party, especially its leader Rahul Gandhi.

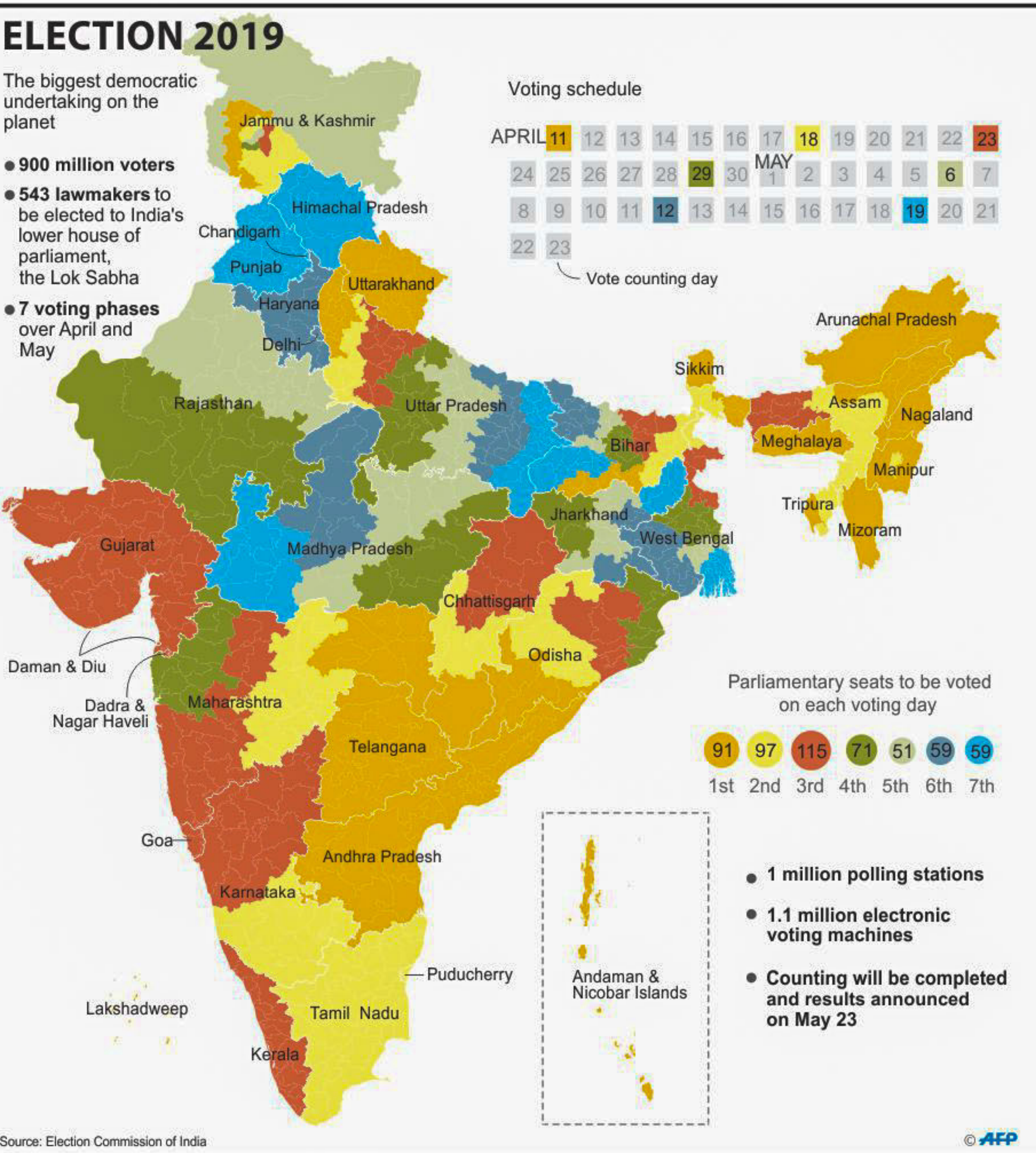
His Twitter following of more than 46 million makes him one of the world's most-tracked leaders.

Narendra Damodardas Modi is said to have joined the Hindu hardline Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) nationalist group at the age of eight and left home as a teenager, abandoning a marriage arranged by his family, to become an RSS activist.

An assiduously hard worker, Modi rose through the ranks of the RSS and its partner BJP to become chief minister of his Gujarat home state in 2001. Bolstering the Gujarat economy and espousing outspoken nationalist causes provided the launchpad for him to lead the BJP into the 2014 general election. The country was seduced by his story and the party won the biggest landslide in India's history, decimating Congress.

Modi's personalised politics will be the "defining" issue of the election, even his party admits, while many experts say that Modi is carrying his party through this election.

"Take away Modi and 90 percent of the speeches of the opposition leaders would be over," Finance Minister Arun Jaitley told the Indian Express in an interview published Monday.



RAHUL GANDHI

Destiny's child or an 'empty suit'?

AFP, New Delhi

Rahul Gandhi, vying to become the latest prime minister from India's most famous dynasty, has worked hard to shed his image as an entitled footloose princeling and political lightweight.

But the great-grandson, grandson and son of three past premiers of the world's biggest democracy still faces a tough task beating Prime Minister Narendra Modi in elections starting Thursday.

Rahul was enrolled at Harvard but dropped out after a year, following his father's death in 1991. He later graduated from Rollins College, Florida and in 1994 earned a master's degree from Cambridge.

While in his 20s he lived in London, where he worked at a management consultancy for a time.

His Italian-born mother Sonia Gandhi, widow of Rajiv Gandhi, took charge of the Congress party in 1998 before handing over the reins to Rahul, her first-born, in 2017.

Ten years earlier, in 2007, leaked US diplomatic cables said Rahul was viewed as an "empty suit" and "lightweight", with little known about his political beliefs -- if he had any. But by 2009, the US assessment changed.

After Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) crushed Congress at the 2014 election, Gandhi set about reviving and rejuvenating the party, while keeping older hands on side.

He has, in contrast to the Hindu nationalist Modi, reached out to Muslim voters and stressed his secular credentials, and also to women, promising to bring legislation setting aside seats in parliament for them.

Last December, Congress secured victory in three key state elections, including in Modi's northern Indian "cow belt" heartland, suddenly making Gandhi look like a serious contender.

During the campaign for the election, Gandhi has attacked Modi's record on farmers, jobs, alleged corruption in purchase of Rafale jets from France and his close ties to business. Gandhi's leftist manifesto pledges to end abject poverty by 2030 and give cash transfers to 50 million families. Opinion polls show little impact of the allegations on Modi.

EC bans Modi film until after election

AFP, New Delhi

A biopic about Prime Minister Narendra Modi described by his opponents as propaganda has been barred from release during the national election, a government body overseeing the poll said yesterday.

India's election commission said any biopic "which has the potential to disturb the level playing field during the elections should not be displayed". Under Indian election rules, the publication of any content deemed as campaign material -- including advertisements, films and even social media -- requires the election commission's prior approval. The commission, in its statement outlining its decision, said it was vital that "the power of media is not used in such a manner which affects the general conduct" of the elections.

Rahul files nomination from Amethi

AFP, New Delhi

Congress president Rahul Gandhi rode on the rooftop of a truck, flanked by sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, her husband Robert Vadra and her children Raihan and Miraya, as he moved on a narrow road in his constituency Amethi in Uttar Pradesh to file his nomination papers. The truck moved in slo-mo, wading through a large crowd on the road. People sprayed flower petals on the ensemble cast from their balconies, many training their mobile phone cameras. Rahul Gandhi was seen intermittently holding up a T-shirt with the logo of his main campaign theme for this election -- the NYAY scheme that promises Rs. 72,000 a year to India's poorest. At the election office, his mother Sonia Gandhi also joined him.

900 artists urge people to vote for BJP

Our Correspondent, New Delhi

More than 900 artists in a joint statement yesterday urged the people to vote for the BJP in the coming parliamentary elections and said the country needs a strong government to fight terrorism. The statement said that during the last five years, India has seen a government that delivered "corruption-free good governance and development oriented administration". The joint statement comes a week after more than 600 theatre personalities had signed a letter asking people not to vote for BJP and its allies arguing that the idea of India and its constitution are under threat.

INDIA'S MASSIVE GENERAL ELECTION

India holds general election today in the world's largest democratic exercise, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking a second straight term. The election will held in seven phases until May 19 and votes will be counted on May 23. Here are some facts and figures about the election in the country of 1.3 billion people.

VOTERS

About 900 million people are eligible to vote, nearly the combined population of Europe and Brazil, and 10 percent more than in the 2014 election. About 432 million eligible voters are women. There are 15 million voters between 18 and 19 years of age. In the first phase of the election, 1,279 candidates are contesting 91 constituencies, but only 7 percent of candidates are women. Of the 8,251 candidates in the last election, only 668 were women.

WHO'S RUNNING?

Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are seeking re-election after a landslide victory in 2014. The main national opposition party is the Congress, led by Rahul Gandhi, the scion of India's most influential political dynasty. Gandhi is the son of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. His grandmother Indira was India's first female leader, and his grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the country's founding prime minister. But numerous other regional parties also wield significant influence across the country, with some for and others against Modi -- all of which can help define the outcome.

In the 2014 contest, there were a total of 464 political parties and more than 8,000 candidates courting voters across the nation.

WHAT THEY ARE FIGHTING FOR

The fight is for 543 of the 545 seats in the lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha. The remaining two seats are reserved for the Anglo-Indian community. These members are nominated by India's president.

WHICHEVER PARTY WINS THE MAJORITY

Whichever party wins the majority of seats gets to choose the prime minister. If no one party wins a majority, a coalition of different parties can come together to form the next government.

THE MASSIVE TASK OF INDIAN EC

The Election Commission of India (ECI), an autonomous constitutional body, oversees the election with more than 300 full-time officials at its headquarters in New Delhi. The commission has set up about 1 million polling stations, 10 percent more than in 2014. No voter should be more than 2 km (1.2 miles) away from a polling station. More than 11 million government officials will travel by foot, road, special train, helicopter, boat, and sometimes elephant, to hold the election. Polling stations are often in remote areas. More than 80,000 stations lacked mobile connectivity and nearly 20,000 were in forest or semi-forest areas, a commission survey said last year. A polling station in the Gir forest of western Gujarat state will be set up for just one voter, a Hindu monk. Voting will take place over 39 days, in part to allow officials and security forces time to redeploy. Vote counting for all 543 constituencies is done in a single day. The 2014 election cost 38.7 billion rupees (\$552 million), according to commission estimates.

CASH, DRUGS, LIQUOR

Some political parties and their supporters offer cash, drugs and liquor in exchange for votes. The commission has seized 5.1 billion rupees (\$73.6 million) in cash, some 21,500 kg of drugs worth 7.2 billion rupees, and 8.8 million litres of liquor valued at 1.8 billion rupees. It seized 12 billion rupees in cash, liquor and drugs in the last election.

VOTING MACHINES

The commission used 1.8 million electronic voting machines in the last election. Opposition groups say the machines can be tampered with and they want the commission to tighten its security measures to cross check votes in this election.

WHAT ARE THE KEY BATTLE-GROUNDS?

Voting is spread across India's 29 states and seven additional, smaller territories, known as union territories. Some areas carry more weight than others because of the number of Lok Sabha constituencies in each state or union territory, something that's based on how populous they are. The bigger the state, the more seats it has. And the biggest battleground by many miles is the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. It's India's most populous state, with about 200 million inhabitants -- if it was a country, it would be the fifth largest on the planet. Uttar Pradesh accounts for 80 seats in the Lok Sabha, making it critical to the formation of any Indian government. Other key regions to watch will be western state of Maharashtra, which accounts for 48 Lok Sabha seats; West Bengal in the east with 42 seats; Bihar in the north, which accounts for 40; and in the south, Tamil Nadu, which has 39 seats.

SOURCE: REUTERS, CNN

NEWSIN brief

NZ MPs votes to change gun laws after massacre

Lawmakers in New Zealand yesterday voted almost unanimously to change gun laws, less than a month after its worst peacetime mass shooting, in which 50 people were killed in attacks on two mosques in Christchurch. Parliament passed the gun reform bill, the first substantial changes to New Zealand's gun laws in decades, by 119 to 1. It must now receive royal assent from the governor general to become law. "There have been very few occasions when I have seen parliament come together in this way, and I can't imagine circumstances when it is more necessary," Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said in presenting the legislation. Ardern banned the sale of all military style semi-automatics (MSSA) and assault rifles just six days after the March 15 shooting, and announced plans to tighten gun laws.

Dramatic fall in global executions: Amnesty

Executions fell worldwide by nearly a third last year to their lowest levels in at least a decade, but several countries recorded a rise, Amnesty International said yesterday. Use of the death penalty dropped in Iran -- by an eye-popping 50 percent, following a change to its anti-narcotics laws -- Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia, the rights group found in its annual review. But it rose in Belarus, Japan, Singapore, South Sudan and the United States, while Thailand resumed executions for the first time in a decade and Sri Lanka threatened to follow suit. "Despite regressive steps from some, the number of executions carried out by several of the worst perpetrators has fallen significantly," said Kumi Naidoo, Amnesty International's Secretary General. He added the "dramatic" drop globally proved that "even the most unlikely countries are starting to change their ways and realise the death penalty is not the answer".

Netanyahu set for 5th term

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was on path for victory in Israel's election yesterday after nearly complete results put him in position to form a right-wing coalition and further extend his long tenure in office.

The results from Tuesday's vote came despite corruption allegations against the 69-year-old premier and put him on track to become Israel's longest-serving prime minister later this year. It will be his record fifth term as premier.

His Likud party looked set to finish with a similar number of seats in parliament to his main rival, ex-military chief Benny Gantz's centrist Blue and White alliance, Israeli media reported.

But with 97 percent of the votes counted, results showed the Likud and other right-wing parties allied to him with some 65 seats in the 120-seat parliament.

The results would seem to leave President Reuven Rivlin, whose task is to ask one of the candidates to form a government, with little choice but to pick Netanyahu.

Intensive coalition negotiations will follow and could drag on for days or even weeks.

Final results are expected by this afternoon, with ballots for soldiers and other special categories of voters yet to be counted.

The close race between the two main parties had led to uncertainty after polls closed on Tuesday night and exit surveys were released.

Both Netanyahu and Gantz claimed victory after the initial exit surveys that gave Blue and White the most seats.

But even then Netanyahu appeared best placed to form a coalition, with both parties in any case



falling far short of an outright majority.

The election was in many ways a referendum on the premier who has built a reputation as guarantor of the country's security and economic growth, but whose populism and alleged corruption left many ready for change.

He engaged in populist rhetoric that critics said amounted to the demonisation of Arab Israelis and others.

True to form, Netanyahu issued a deeply controversial pledge only three days before the election, saying he planned to annex Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank should he win.

Extending Israeli sovereignty on a large scale in the West Bank could be the death knell to already fading hopes for a two-state solution with the Palestinians. The turnout of voters was 67.9 percent compared to 71.8 percent in the last election in 2015.

Netanyahu has been premier for a total of more than 13 years.

British PM voices regret over 1919 Amritsar massacre

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday expressed regret for a massacre by British troops in India in 1919 but stopped short of a full apology.

"We deeply regret what happened and the suffering caused," May told the British Parliament, as India prepares to mark the 100th anniversary of the killings.

Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the main opposition Labour Party, called for "a full, clear and unequivocal apology".

The April 13, 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which British troops opened fire on thousands of unarmed protesters, remains an enduring scar from British colonial rule in India.

Colonial-era records show about 400 people died in the northern city of Amritsar when soldiers opened fire on men, women and children in an enclosed area, but Indian figures put the toll at closer to 1,000.

Former British prime minister David Cameron described it as "deeply shameful" during a visit in 2013 but also stopped short of an apology.

May's statement comes a day after British MPs at Westminster Hall of the Parliament complex debated the issue of a formal apology for the April 13, 1919 massacre to mark its centenary this Saturday.

Foreign Office Minister Mark Field had told MPs that he had been "compelled" by the arguments to raise the issue of going further than the "deepest regret" expressed over the killings during the British Raj.

The debate was tabled by Conservative Party MP Bob Blackman, who opened proceedings with a strong sentiment of "shame" as he called on the British government to apologise.



Dalai Lama 'doing better' after chest infection

The Dalai Lama has been admitted to hospital in New Delhi for treatment but is "doing much better" and should be released soon, his close aide told AFP yesterday. "His Holiness is doing much better, but he is still undergoing treatment at a hospital and we hope in few days he will be discharged," Tenzin Taklha, the Dalai Lama's personal spokesman, told AFP. Another aide told AFP the 83-year-old Buddhist monk flew to the Indian capital early Tuesday for a doctor's visit at Max hospital after he experienced a "light cough." "The doctor said there's nothing to worry about. It's not that serious," said Ngodup Tsering, the Dalai Lama's representative in the United States. "He's taking a few days' rest." Kangra police superintendent Santosh Patial told The Indian Express that the Dalai Lama, who is based in Dharamshala and has been in permanent exile in India for some 60 years, took a regular morning flight Tuesday and was not airlifted.

SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP