

# India's vote enters second round

● More than 157 million of India's 900 million voters are eligible to cast ballots

● Tens of thousands of troops, paramilitaries and police have been deployed to Kashmir for the vote

● The last vote is on May 19 and final results will be released on May 23

AFP | New Delhi, India

Millions of voters across India cast ballots in the second round of the world's biggest election yesterday.

With more than a month to go before the marathon ends, Prime Minister Narendra Modi kept up a punishing schedule of rallies as he seeks a second term, while opposition leader Rahul Gandhi maintained attacks on the right wing Hindu nationalist government.

Voting went ahead in 95 of India's 543 constituencies, most of it peacefully, but with noticeable blackspots.

More than 157 million of India's 900 million electorate were eligible to vote on the second of the seven rounds of voting. The last is on May 19 and final results will be released on May 23.

Polls in the southern states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu could prove decisive in choosing the next prime minister and long lines formed outside polling stations.

But voting was cancelled in one Tamil Nadu constituency after about \$1.5 million in cash -- believed to be intended as bribes -- was seized by police.

At some polling stations in tense Kashmir state, security forces outnumbered voters with tens of thousands of troops, par-



Indian voters queue up to cast their vote at a polling station in Rohini village some 27km from Siliguri in West Bengal

amilitaries and police deployed to the region for the vote.

Authorities closed down mobile internet services and set up barricades to block roads to thwart any attack. Groups of youths still hurled stones at them.

Kashmir surged into Modi's campaign after a February suicide bomb attack that killed 40 paramilitaries and brought India and Pakistan -- which each control part of Kashmir -- to the brink of war.

Modi is seen as the favourite but faces an increasingly tough challenge from opposition Congress party leader Gandhi.

He was also caught up in a firestorm Thursday over an election official who was suspended after he insisted on searching Modi's helicopter.

The election commission said the search violated their rules on VIPs, but the Congress party slammed the decision on their official Twitter account.

"What is Modi carrying in his helicopter that he doesn't want India to see?" Congress asked in

a Twitter statement.

In New Delhi, the spokesman for Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) narrowly dodged a shoe thrown at him by a protester at a press conference at the party's headquarters.

Modi sought to counter critics of his campaign in a television interview this week when he said: "If farmers die, then it is an election issue, but when soldiers die then it is not an election issue? How can that be?"

Gandhi fired back in an interview with The Hindu daily, published Thursday, saying Modi's party was deliberately ignoring economic problems.

"The fact is that the biggest national security issue is unemployment," he said.

Gandhi, seeking to become the fourth member of his family to take the prime minister's office, has pledged to end abject poverty by 2030 and give cash transfers to 50 million families.

The BJP has promised a \$1.4-trillion infrastructure blitz to create jobs.



An Indian soldier carries an 93-year-old woman to cast her vote at a polling station in the Indian state of Bihar

Denver schools shut as police hunt woman obsessed by Columbine



18 year-old suspect Sol Pais

Los Angeles, United States

Schools in the US city of Denver closed yesterday amid fears that an armed woman obsessed with the Columbine High School massacre 20 years ago poses a "credible threat."

US authorities have mounted a massive search for Sol Pais, 18, who traveled from Florida to Colorado where she reportedly purchased a pump-action shotgun and ammunition.

"She is armed and considered to be extremely dangerous," the Jefferson County sheriff's office said.

Security fears have soared because Saturday is the 20th anniversary of the massacre, at the time the deadliest school shooting in US history, which unfolded in the Denver suburb of Columbine.

Two heavily armed gunmen killed 12 fellow students and a teacher before taking their own lives on April 20, 1999, setting off an era of mass shootings in US schools and other public venues.

"Metro area school districts will be closed on Wednesday, April 17 due to ongoing safety concerns," the Colorado Department of Education announced on its Twitter account.

That was a step up from Tuesday when it put Denver area schools on lockdown following an alert from the FBI and stepped up security.

Authorities have posted pictures of Pais, her unsmiling visage framed by shoulder-length brown hair.

She was last seen in Colorado on Monday night.

## Mars base for teens opens in desert

Jinchang, China

A Mars base simulator sits in the middle of nowhere in China's Gobi desert, but instead of housing astronauts training to live on the Red Planet, the facility is full of teenagers.

Surrounded by barren hills in northwest Gansu province, "Mars Base 1" opened to the public on Wednesday with the aim of exposing teens -- and soon tourists -- to what life could be like on the planet.

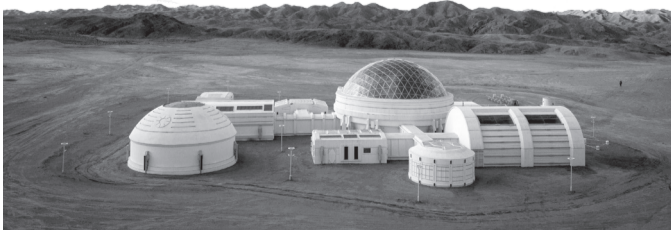
The white-coloured base has a silver dome and nine modules, including living

quarters, a control room, a greenhouse and an airlock.

The teenagers don space-suits and go on treks in the desert, where they can explore caves in the martian-like landscape. The closest town is Jinchang, some 40 kilometres (25 miles) away.

The company behind the project, C-Space, plans to open the base -- currently an educational facility -- to tourists in the next year.

While teenagers pretend to be on Mars, China is planning to send a probe to the real Red Planet next year.



"Mars Base 1", a C-Space Project, in the Gobi desert, some 40 km from Jinchang in China's northwest Gansu province

## India cancels poll in southern area over 'vote buying'

● Polls were cancelled in Vellore constituency in coastal Tamil Nadu state

● The ruling came after authorities seized more than 110 million rupees from a candidate

● No fresh date has been announced for polling

New Delhi, India

Indian election authorities have cancelled voting in a southern region of the country after seizing more than 110 million rupees (\$1.5 million) they believe was meant to influence the outcome, officials said.

It is the first time a ballot has been cancelled in a national election over attempted vote-buying, officials said.

The decision comes as Indi-



Indian election workers carry boxes containing Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) at a distribution point in Chennai ahead of the second phase of India's general election.

ans vote in a mammoth national election being held over several phases, the next of which begins Thursday.

But voters in the Vellore constituency in coastal Tamil Nadu state will not be going to the polls as scheduled after the Election Commission of India ruled there were fears of a "systematic design to influence voters".

The ruling came after author-

ities seized more than 110 million rupees from a candidate in the run-up to the vote.

The commission said late Tuesday that the environment in Vellore was no longer conducive to "free and ethical" elections. No fresh date has been announced for polling in the constituency.

Nearly 100 constituencies in 13 states go to the polls Thursday in the second round of the

seven-phase election that began on April 11.

Almost 900 million voters are eligible to cast their votes to elect 543 members to the lower house of the parliament, with results expected on May 23.

Attempts to secure votes in return for cash, liquor, electronic gadgets and even goats have been reported across Tamil Nadu in the run-up to voting.

More than 1.3 billion rupees (\$18.7 million) and one ton of gold worth 3 billion rupees have been seized in the state since the poll dates were announced on March 10.

Elsewhere in the country, polls have been delayed by five days in parts of the northeastern state of Tripura over security fears.

Polls will be held there on April 23 instead of Thursday.

And in the country's east, Bangladeshi star actor Ferdous Ahmed has been forced to leave India after he was discovered campaigning for a candidate from the opposition Congress party, officials at the Bangladesh High Commission in Kolkata said.