

Displaced Christians Vote First during India's Elections

CARROLLTON, Texas, April 27 /Christian Newswire/ -- Thousands of Christians living in relief camps in Orissa were among the first to vote in India's national elections. India's four-week-long election kicked off April 16 in Orissa, India, where thousands of families were left homeless after violence last fall.

Some Christian leaders had expressed concern that the thousands of people displaced by the violence would be denied the right to vote. Indian election commissioner S.Y. Quereshi told BBC news that the first phase of the election was conducted in this area so that the security forces could concentrate all their efforts in one area.

A reported 3,000 Christians in relief camps in Kandhamal, Orissa, voted on April 16. Voting will also take place on April 23 and 30 and May 7 and 13.

Gospel for Asia President K.P. Yohannan said Christians are praying that the elections will bring significant changes to the country, especially to the battered state of Orissa. He believes the Indian people are ready to send a message to their government.

"I think they're going to hear the voice of the people that they're not in favor of this kind of abuse and hurting the minorities, especially the Christians," Yohannan said. "This election is going to bring some positive changes to the state of Orissa, and we're praying for that."

Despite the security precautions, rebel groups made their mark on the first day of voting. Seventeen people were killed in reported attacks by Maoist rebels.

About 60 percent of India's 714 million eligible voters are expected to cast their ballots during the elections. Final results will be released May 16.

Indians are voting for a new prime minister and new representatives for its main governing body, the Lok Sabha (also called the House of People). Lok Sabha representatives serve five-year terms, and then the body is dissolved. All new representatives are then chosen by the people. The Lok Sabha, established in 2004, has 543 members from 37 political parties. The parties with the most representatives include the Indian National Congress Party, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Communist Party of India.

The Congress Party claims to have a national vision and says it will fight for a secular, democratic and socially just country. India's current prime minister, Manmohan Singh, is from the Congress Party. The party has 141 representatives in the current Lok Sabha.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the Hindu Nationalist Party also says it wants a secular, democratic society. Party members also promote an ideology that seeks to preserve the Hindu heritage of India. The BJP has 141 seats.

The Communist Party has 42 members in the Lok Sabha.

The numerous political parties represented in the Lok Sabha lead to a fragmentation of power. Once their legislative terms begin, the parties will get together and form coalitions in order to maintain a majority voting bloc.

India is the largest democracy in the world. The new Lok Sabha that Indian voters elect will be in place by June 2.

Gospel for Asia is an evangelical mission organization based in Carrollton, Texas, involved in sharing the love of Jesus across South Asia.