Final phase ends with blast & clash

Naxalites triggered a landmine explosion in their stronghold of Jhumra Pahar in Bokaro early this morning, hours before the gates opened for the final phase of polling in 28 constituencies spread over eight districts.

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The blast, in which a jawan was killed, and clashes in Poraiyahat, where legislator Prashant Mandal suffered head injuries, marked the last phase, in which around 55 per cent polling was recorded.

Today's polling was crucial for JMM chief Shibu Soren as two of his sons are in the fray in his bastion of Santhal Parganas.

Krishna Kumar Kshatri, a jawan of the Jharkhand Armed Police-I, was killed in the landmine explosion around 1.30 am near Morha village in Bokaro. The people of the villages in the area around Jhumra Pahar do not vote out of fear. State police chief S.M. Caire had visited the villages a few days ago and appealed to the people to vote, promising adequate security.

The jawans were going to the villages to take up positions outside polling booths when the rebels set off the explosion. So powerful was the blast that Kshatri's rifle was smashed into pieces and his rugsack was flung 15 feet into the air where it landed on a tree branch.

Two other jawans, Parashuram Sharma and Gopal Sharma, were wounded in the explosion. They were brought to Ranchi and admitted in RIMS. Caire termed the incident a "desperate" move of the rebels. "They are utterly frustrated now. The elections have been successful. Our fight against extremism will continue as usual," he said.

The administration described the day as having passed off peacefully. But clashes in Poraiyahat belied the claim. Sitting JMM MLA Mandal was injured in a pitched battle between supporters of the party and the JD(U). Police had to fire 10 rounds to disperse the crowd.

Mandal was on an inspection at Amarpur village this morning, when, he claims, he was attacked by armed "criminals." "I lost consciousness and collapsed. Perhaps my attackers thought I was dead and they went away. That saved my life," he said.

The legislator, who was admitted to Sadar hospital, profusely bleeding from the wounds he sustained in his head and abdomen, sat on a hunger strike in front of the deputy commissioner's office soon after he was discharged. He needed five stitches on his head and three in his abdomen. "I had repeatedly asked for paramilitary forces, but no one listened to me," he said.

Dumka, however, remained calm though people had kept their fingers crossed given the charged campaign carried out by Hemant Soren of the JMM and Stephen Marandi, the JMM rebel contesting as an Independent.

The urban voters appeared more enthusiastic about voting. For the rural people, it was just another day. "Elections come once in five years and every time the politicians come and make tall promises which are never fulfilled. What is the point of voting," said Jiten Hansda of Bandajharia village in Jamtara.

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