Srinagar tense on election eve; Poll official injured in stone pelting

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***Over 32,000 security men deployed**

Fayaz Bukhari

SRINAGAR, Apr 29: After militant attack and law and order problem in South Kashmir on poll day last week, there is security alert in Srinagar Parliamentary constituency amid heightened security after massive crackdown on separatists and their supporters in which over 1000 people were arrested.

There is heightened tension in Srinagar with security forces and poll staff making movements to reach to the polling stations amid stray incidents of stone pelting at few places in Srinagar and Budgam.

Police and para-military forces had to fire in air after stone pelting on a polling station in Sozet village near Narbal on Srinagar-Baramulla road tonight. One poll official, Feroz Ahmad Shah was injured in stone pelting on poll staff at Daresh Kadal and Rajouri Kadal area of Srinagar.

The polling parties for old city was still on way till late night as they were allowed to leave for their destinations at around 9 p.m. from Youth hostel near Iqbal Park for security reasons. Fearing trouble, they were allowed to take Boulevard road to reach their destinations.

After a poll official was killed in South Kashmir last week during polls, the fear looms large over poll staff. One of the Presiding Officer who was on way to the Polling Station in old city at midnight said: “It is like a natural calamity for us”.

Earlier poll staff protested at Youth hostel, Srinagar against what they said lack of proper arrangements by the Election Commission. However, the Returning Officer of Srinagar constituency, Farooq Ahmad Shah said: “We paid them money for one day. It is not our job to provide them facilities. We provided them working dinner and breakfast which is not allowed as per norms. We ensured that they are comfortable. They have to make their own arrangements.”

Authorities have deployed 241 companies of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Border Security Force (BSF) and Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) for polling duty.

Around 50 additional companies of CRPF have been deployed to tackle stone throwers. The 15 battalions of Jammu and Kashmir Armed Police (JKAP) and Indian Reserve Police (IRP) have also been deployed to maintain law and order. The polling stations have been taken over by the security forces this evening.

In order to avoid militant attacks, the searches and patrolling by police, Special Operation Group (SOG), CRPF and Army has been intensified in Srinagar constituency. Around 60-70 mobile bunkers have been setup at various strategic locations to tackle militant movement and more checkpoints have been established.

The separatist leaders and militants have asked people to boycott the polls. The militants have also threatened action against the voters. Several posters attributed to Hizbul Mujahideen

appeared in old city threatening voters.

Over 1000 stone pelters and suspected persons have been arrested across Kashmir for smooth conduct of the polls. Senior separatist leaders Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Mirwaiz Omar Farooq have been put under house arrest while few dozen others have been arrested as separatists have called for poll boycott.

Srinagar Constituency will go to the poll tomorrow to decide the fate of 14 candidates, including NC President Farooq Abdullah and PDP leader Tariq Hameed Karra. The other candidates are: Fayaz Ahmad Bhat of BJP, Mohammad Maqbool Malik of National Panthers Party, Dr Raja Muzaffar Bhat of Aam Aadmi Party, Mushtaq Shamim of Akhil Bhartiya Muslim League and Aga Syed Mohsin, Bashir Mohammad Reshi, Chetan Sharma, Rabia Altaf, Riyaz Ahmad Wani, Abdul Rashid Tantary, Mohammad Shafi Guroo and Mirza Sajad Hussain Beigh.

As many as 12, 00, 739 electors including 5, 72, 217 female voters are going to exercise their franchise in 02-Srinagar Parliamentary Constituency.

Srinagar Parliamentary constituency is spread over three districts of Srinagar, Budgam and Ganderbal. It is considered to be NC bastion as they have never lost elections form this seat barring 1971 and 1996 when it did not contest the polls.

The Srinagar Lok Sabha seat has 12.31 lakh voters including 5.72 lakh women who are eligible to cast their votes at 1546 polling stations. Of the 1546 polling stations, only 3.5 per cent have been declared as normal. Around 1021 polling stations have been declared as hypersensitive and 470 as sensitive.

Eighteen polling stations have been set up for migrant voters in Jammu, Udhampur and Delhi. While 13 polling stations have been set up in Jammu, one has been set up in Udhampur and four in Delhi to facilitate the migrant Kashmiri Pandits to exercise their franchise.

The Srinagar Parliamentary constituency has registered a low voter turnout ever since the eruption of militancy in the state in 1990. In 2009 polls, the turnout was only 25.55 per cent while in 2004, it was a dismal 18 per cent.

The campaigning for the Srinagar Lok Sabha seat was by and large peaceful. However, explosions near the venue of National Conference election rallies in Magam area in Budgam and Khanyar in Srinagar on Sunday triggered panic, prompting security forces to beef up security.

After attacks on poll parties in the evening on poll day in South Kashmir, the poll hours have been reduced by one hour in Srinagar Parliamentary constituency going to polls tomorrow and Baramulla seat, where polling will be held on May 7.

According to a notification issued by the Election Commission of India, poll hours for Srinagar and Baramulla Parliamentary Constituencies, have been fixed from 0700 hrs to 1700 hrs and no reason was given for this.

An official spokesman said arrangements for conducting free, fair and impartial polls in Srinagar constituency have been finalised. “In this connection, the poll staff for the Constituency has been dispatched along with Electronic Voting Machines and other poll material”, he added.

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