**33 killed in Coimbatore blasts**

At least 33 people -- including eight women and one child -- died and 153 others were injured in a series of 12 bomb blasts in Coimbatore on Saturday, shortly before Bharatiya Janata Party president L K Advani arrived for a campaign meeting.

Advani, whose flight from Thiruvanathapuram was delayed by three hours, was not present at the rally site when the blasts occurred.

In a related incident, Advani claimed later that a ['human bomb,'](http://www.rediff.com/news/1998/feb/14blast1.htm) who was chased by the police from the rally site, blew himself up.

A curfew has been imposed in the textile city, and the army deployed to contain the widespread riots which followed the blasts. Tension reigns, the telecommunication system is down and vehicles are off the roads. People are staying indoors. Shoot-at-sight orders have been issued to quell the violence.

The situation, one reporter from Coimbatore told Star News, is now under control and no fresh incidents of violence have occurred after 1900 hours.

Sources said the blasts occurred in 12 places, including R S Puram Kaliyarange, the meeting venue, near the railway station, the central bus stand, a commercial complex and the medical college hospital.

The first blast occurred at 1550 hours. For the next hour, sources said, the explosions continued across the city and suburban Sundarpuram where four people died. Three more explosions were heard near the dais from where Advani was supposed to address a meeting at 1600 hours. The BJP leader's flight from Thiruvanthapuram was delayed by three hours and he did not arrive at R S Puram as scheduled. At least nine people, including three nurses, died on the spot at R S Puram.

One blast occurred in a shop named Rajendra Textiles, a source in Coimbatore said, killing three women on the spot.

At west Sambandapuram junction, four blasts occurred simultaneously. Six bodies were found at the venue. Four bodies were recovered from near the Thiruvalluvar bus stand. The bombs were reportedly placed in two wheelers and cars parked near the blast sites.

The blasts occurred despite the elaborate security measures, including the deployment of paramilitary forces, which Advani's presence had invited in the city.

The blasts came four years and 11 months after the serial blasts in Bombay which killed over 300 people. The modus operandi appeared identical to the March 12, 1993 explosions, with bombs detonating all over Coimbatore.

Though no one has taken responsibility for the blasts, a home ministry official in Delhi, speaking on condition of anonymity, indicated that the explosions may have been the handiwork of Islamic fundamentalists who have become active in the prosperous textile town after the Babri Masjid demolition. He said the Intelligence Bureau had warned the Union home ministry and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam ministry of such a possibility in a report in late January.

Sources in Coimbatore said mobs ran amuck soon after the blasts, looting and burning Muslim shops in scenes reminiscent of last December's riots. Muslim establishments -- including the wellknown Shobha shopping centre -- across the city were then attacked by maurading mobs, angered by the slaying of a traffic policemen, allegedly by activists of the Al-Umma group.

Some Muslims injured in those incidents were killed when they were recuperating at the medical centre hospital, minutes after the local DMK MP was attacked there. The Tamil Nadu government deployed the army -- reportedly for the first time in the state's history -- to control the situation. Twenty people died in the December disturbances.

Two army companies were been deployed once again in Coimbatore on Saturday. The Tamil Nadu government also banned the Al-Umma and All India Al-Jihad Committee. Al-Umma has, however, denied responsibilty for the blasts. Chief Minister M Karunanidhi was addressing a meeting in Chintadripet when Coimbatore was reeling under the blasts and the rioting. Karunanidhi appeared not to have been briefed by the officials during the rally and was seen relaxed. He spoke till 1654 hours.

Advani, who arrived in Coimbatore three hours behind schedule, could not address the meeting despite his insistence as the crowds had fled in panic following the blasts.

The BJP leader then drove to the medical college hospital, one of the blast sites, and called on the victims, before leaving for Tirichirapalli, where he was scheduled to address a joint rally along with AIADMK general secretary J Jayalalitha.

Security in and around Tiruchirapalli town was tightened immediately after the Coimbatore blasts. A special team of police commandos flew in from Madras to provide security at the airport at the time of Advani's arrival and departure. No one was allowed inside the airport, which is located 12 kms from the meeting venue. Tight security was also evident at Marakkadai, the rally site.

In Madurai, which was reported tense, 500 police personnel were pressed into service for a round the clock vigil in the city. Police Commissioner P C Viswanathan said 16 police stations were assigned with eight assistant commissioners. All important places in the town, including its many temples, have been provided with security. Security in Tirunelveli besides the sensitive Kadayanallur and Tenkasi areas has been enhanced, the police said.

Dindigul Deputy Inspector General of Police Subramaniam said two companies of Tamil Nadu special police and Central Reserve Police Force were deployed in Cumbum and Uthamapalayam. Armed police have been pressed into service in the Palani and Dindugul towns.

Karunanidhi, who spoke to Prime Minister I K Gujral on Saturday evening, said the blasts were the handiwork of fundamentalist forces, which were out to scuttle the peaceful conduct of the election in the state.

Gujral, Karunanidhi said, had assured him that the Centre would take all steps to "defeat the conspiracy, hatched by a foreign hand, to disrupt democracy in the country."

Karunanidhi reviewed the situation with top government officials including Chief Secretary K A Nambiar and Director General of Police F C Sharma at the state secretariat. Both Karunanidhi and Nambiar will visit Coimbatore on Sunday morning.

In a statement released late on Saturday night, Advani said he was the target of the serial blasts in Coimbatore. The BJP president said anti-national forces had targetted the electoral process and he and his party were the clear targets.

The first blast occurred about 200 feet from the stage at the scheduled time of his arrival and there were blasts on all four sides of the venue subsequently. Had the meeting started on time, he said, the consequences would have been unimaginable.