

Sri Lanka tense after poll strife kills five

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Tens of thousands of police and soldiers remained on alert throughout Sri Lanka today after yesterday's presidential election, in which at least five people died in dozens of political clashes.

The defence ministry announced a two-day island-wide curfew, starting last night, to ward off any protests arising from the early lead taken by Prime Minister Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga over Srma Dissanayake, who ran in place of her assassinated husband.

Official sources early today said Kumaratunga, the ruling People's Alliance candidate, had won resounding victories in most of the country's 22 electoral districts and was leading in those where counting was still going on.

State-owned Rupavahini television said Kumaratunga, polled 60 per cent of the total compared to the 38 per cent tallied by opposition candidate Dissanayake.

Dissanayake's husband was killed Oct. 24. Kumaratunga's husband, a popular movie actor who went into politics, was assassinated six years ago.

Final results were expected later today in the island state that has looked like an armed camp during the final days of the widows' violence-racked campaign.

Kumaratunga was the heavy favorite. Her socialist People's Alliance won parliamentary elections three months ago after promising to open talks with Tamil rebels.

Civil war with the Tamil guerrillas has killed some 34,000 people.

Winning the presidency

would give Kumaratunga a mandate to push ahead with peace talks — suspended after Gamini Dissanayake was killed at an election rally by a suicide bomber believed to be a Tamil rebel.

Fifty-six other people died with him.

Dissanayake's widow Srma replaced him but failed to generate a wide sympathy vote.

Tasting victory, the prime minister's supporters danced in the rain after the polls closed.

But Tamil rebels struck as the polls opened, attacking a military base 290 kilometres north of Colombo and killing three soldiers. Rebel casualties were not known.

Two others died in fights between political rivals at Narammala, 80 kilometres north of Colombo, and in the southern town of Eheliyagoda, police said.

Clashes disrupted voting at more than 100 polling stations.

More than 40,000 police and thousands of soldiers were deployed to guard nearly 10,000 polling stations, except in the Tamil-dominated north and east, where government troops have battled the separatist guerrillas for 11 years.

"I expect a resounding victory," Kumaratunga said after casting her ballot in her home town of Nittambuwa, 32 kilometres north of Colombo.

Hindu Tamils are the largest minority in Sri Lanka, where the Buddhist Sinhalese control the military, government and business. Tamils make up 18 per cent of the country's 17 million people.

Kumaratunga's parliamentary victory ended 17 years of rule by the United National Party.