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DELHISVA:

ACTION: POL

INFO: SCI RSO PRESS ECON DCM DAO AMB CHRON ODC ADM

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3191

INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 8688

RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 4325

RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1795

RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2422

RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 2131

RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0496

RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 1602

RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0028

RUEADWD/DA WASHINGTON DC//DAS-ZD/DACS-ZK//

RUEAHQA/CSAF WASHINGTON DC//POLAD//

RUEACMC/CMC WASHINGTON DC//POLAD// 0049

RUENAAA/CNO WASHINGTON DC//POLAD//

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SENSITIVE

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Sharon Ahmad, Senior Reviewer

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PTER, ASEC, PGOV, PREL, PHUM, CIPS, CVIS, IN

SUBJECT: BJP in Gujarat: Failure to stem riots creates an uncertain future

REF: (A) Mumbai 372 ; (B) Mumbai 382 ; (C) Mumbai 392

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- HANDLE ACCORDINGLY

1. (SBU) Summary: A little more than a year after it was hit with a devastating earthquake that killed thousands of people, Gujarat is again in the world's headlines, this time due to Muslim-Hindu clashes which took over 500 lives. The government of Gujarat (GOG)'s ill-prepared and slow response to the violence has focused intense national scrutiny on the only BJP-led government of a major Indian state. Accusations are rife that political calculations had more to do with the GOG's poor handling of this week's crisis than its responsibility for maintaining law and order -- a view buttressed by the Chief Minister's refusal to extend an inquiry into the Godhra train killings to the subsequent anti-Muslim rioting. How this

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criticism will impact the BJP's chances for re-election in the March 2003 state-wide elections remains to be seen, but Gujarat's peculiar political alignments may yet work to the BJP's favor. End summary.

2. (SBU) Gujarat sees more than its share of tragedy and woes. A devastating cyclone in 1999, the January 2001 earthquake, several years of drought which ended in 2001, and now communal rioting resulting in more than 500 deaths are an unfair burden on any state, and a severe trial for any government. Each of these events has brought its share of criticism of the government of Gujarat -- now the only major state in India with a BJP-led administration. Up until now, however, the criticism has been accompanied by an large dollop of sympathy and support, and a reluctance to criticize the government too heavily in its adversity. The replacement in October 2001 of Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel by Narendra Modi was largely seen as the result of an erosion in support for the BJP in the face of accusations against Patel of corruption and incompetence. It was not driven so much by widespread discontent as by a realization within the BJP that an internal "straightening up" was needed, especially in light of Congress Party gains in local elections.

3. (SBU) The bloodletting in Gujarat over the past week, however, has upped the ante considerably. Communal tensions in Gujarat are always just below the surface and Hindu-Muslim violence has broken out several times over the past year. Failure to anticipate the violent reaction to the February 28 attack on Hindu nationalists returning from Ayodhya (reftel A) and slow response to the killings and mayhem which followed (reftels B & C) have brought a fresh and more vociferous chorus of criticism of the GOG's performance in crisis, this time with an ugly note of communal politics accompanying it.

4. (SBU) The media in Mumbai and in Gujarat, in both English and the vernacular, has been aggressive in condemning the response of the government to the mounting violence. As one Mumbai commentator put it, "You and I and other people like us who have no hand in running any government, anticipated the consequences [of the killing of 60 Hindus in the train burning in Godhra] in minutes. So what was the government of Narendra Modi doing in Gujarat? What was the government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee doing in Delhi? I will tell you what they were doing: nothing." Commentaries have also focused on alleged remarks by the GOG Chief Minister referring to the "grave provocations" of the Godhra attack. These words, according to critics, coupled with alleged inaction in the face of mounting attacks on Muslims were an open invitation to rioting. The decision by GOI Home Minister Advani (whose home constituency is in Gujarat) not to travel to the state until March 3 and the delayed deployment of army personnel even after they had arrived in Ahmedabad are also cited as evidence that the GOG was unwilling to move decisively to end the violence. Theories are abounding that the Chief Minister and other BJP officials in Gujarat made a quick calculation that it would be far preferable for the BJP's political fortune not to crack down heavily on Hindu nationalists in the wake of what was, as they saw it, an understandable emotional response to the horrible deaths

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of 60 of their compatriots. Far better for the government, this theory goes, that some steam is let off and that police are not seen to be dealing roughly with Hindu nationalists. Supporters of the government counter that the police did everything they could but the rioters were too numerous to deal with effectively. GOG officials have (startlingly) offered as evidence of their efforts the fact that nearly 100 people were shot and killed by police firing. From the middle, the criticism focuses on the lack of decisiveness and planning by a government which is at best incompetent and at worst criminally negligent.

5. (SBU) Where the truth lies in all these accusations may never be completely known. As of March 5, the only inquiry or investigation to be announced is into the Godhra train incident. CM Modi has so far refused to extend the inquiry into the subsequent rioting against Muslims. The Congress Party has denounced the GOG's handling of the crisis but has not taken as strong and vocal a position as some expected it to -- afraid, say critics, of alienating swing voters among Hindu middle class groups who are sympathetic to the rioters.

6. (SBU) Comment: Gujarat and its BJP government have certainly earned the chorus of criticism which is being thrown at it. The state has seen the worst communal riots in the country since 1992 and the GOG has appeared both ill-prepared to deal with it and insensitive to the suffering caused. By any normal reckoning, it would seem certain that, combined with a slow pace of rehabilitation in the year since the earthquake, the government's record would ensure a sound defeat in state-wide elections scheduled for March 2003. However, the peculiar alignment of voting behavior in Gujarat leaves the question very much open. Muslims are widely seen as in Congress's pocket anyway, and the all-important Patel agricultural community combined with the large Hindu nationalist vote banks are seen as unlikely to desert the BJP. With the Gujarati Hindu middle class -- disgusted as it may be -- looking primarily for economic and political stability, a year of both leading up to March 2003, especially if combined with a good monsoon, might yet retrieve the BJP's fortunes.

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