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## Amend law for proxy voting: EC

NEW DELHI, Dec 20 (PTI)—The Election Commission has urged the Centre to promulgate an Ordinance to amend the law to allow about 25 lakh armed forces personnel and diplomatic representatives to vote in the coming elections to the Lok Sabha and certain state assemblies through "proxy" vote instead of "postal ballot".

In a letter to Prime Minister I.K. Gujral yesterday, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Dr M.S. Gill said the Commission after extensive discussion has unanimously agreed that the only effective method of ensuring full participation of the "ser-

vise voters" in the electoral exercise was to enable them to vote through the system of proxy.

"Under this system, the service voters would be permitted to authorise any adult member of his family, namely his wife or any of his sons or daughters or father or mother, to vote for them in his native place," Dr Gill said.

The CEC said in appropriate cases, an authorised person could even consult the service voter concerned through post or any telecommunication link to ascertain for whom he wishes to vote.

While undertaking the required amendment to the Representation of People Act, 1951 and the Indian Penal

Code, Dr Gill said the Commission would appreciate if modalities to be observed for giving the facility of proxy voting were yet to be decided and prescribed by it.

Dr Gill said the idea of proxy voting has been welcomed not only by the defence personnel but by several major political parties like the BJP as well.

According to him, the facility of proxy voting was prevalent in advanced democracies like the UK and France and even those countries whose democratic traditions were perhaps less developed than India's, like Algeria.

Citing reasons why personnel of armed forces and para-military forces

and diplomatic and consular representatives abroad should be given the right of proxy voting, Dr Gill explained the logistic constraints of despatching postal ballots to them through their record offices and receiving those ballots back before the counting process commenced.

"These postal ballots papers can be despatched to them only after the lists of final contestants in each constituency are prepared after the last date of withdrawal of candidature, and the period available for their despatch and receipt back has now been curtailed following reduction of the minimum campaign period from 20 to 14 days by recent amendment of the law."

Dr Gill said hardly 10 to 15 per cent of postal ballots reached the returning officers in time, even when a comparatively larger interval was available for the purpose before the recent reduction of campaign period.

The CEC said "thus, the facility to service voters to vote by post remains only a facility on paper...that seems to be the reason even for their lethargy in getting themselves enrolled".

The letter said the British High Commissioner in India, Sir David Gore-Booth, had told Dr Gill that he had cast his ballot during the recent general elections.

The initiative in this regard had been taken by Dr Gill in the last one

year and the Commission discussed the issue with the then Chief of Army Staff, Gen Shankar Roychowdhury, and other authorities.

A joint working group, comprising representatives of the armed forces and the Commission, had been set up.

Of the 25-lakh armed forces personnel and other service voters, only about 40,000 had managed to exercise their franchise during the 1996 general elections.

"Thus the most disciplined and devoted sections of our electorate are being denied opportunity to participate in electoral exercises which elect the government of the day", the CEC said.