

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Gandhi makes himself defense minister

The prime minister is taking bold measures to ensure a united India under the control of his government.

P rime Minister Rajiv Gandhi took a major step to strengthen his personal control over the Indian government and policy, in a cabinet reorganization announced Sept. 25. The prime minister himself has taken the portfolio for defense. Gandhi also placed his right-hand man, Arun Singh, previously the parliamentary secretary in the prime minister's office, as deputy defense minister.

The move is prompted by two considerations. First, with the Soviet Union as the major arms supplier for India, the Kremlin will now deal directly with Gandhi and Arun Singh on these issues, decreasing the mediating role of the defense bureaucracy in this relationship. In addition, it will add to Gandhi's ability to broaden the source of India's arms supply—an issue that has emerged as a political football in Delhi.

Gandhi also placed one of his close personal aides in charge of national security. Arun Nehru, a Gandhi confidant and cousin, will head a newly created Ministry of Internal Security, Police, and Law and Order. Although this ministry will operate within the Home Ministry, its title suggests that it will contain the core functions of internal security, including the security of the prime minister.

Arun Nehru brings to this job a brash toughness uncharacteristic of Indian politicians, which Gandhi undoubtedly hopes will help in drastically upgrading intelligence and security.

Mr. Gandhi has handed in the portfolio of foreign affairs minister,

which he held as did Mrs. India Gandhi before him. A former speaker of the house of the Lok Sabha, Bali Ram Bhagat, a highly respected parliamentarian and financial expert, is now minister of foreign affairs. K. R. Narayanan, a former ambassador to the United States who has served for the last two years as minister of state for planning, is now Bhagat's deputy.

Mr. Gandhi also moved to streamline the government. The ministries of education, sports, and youth, and women's affairs, were merged into one, under the name Human Resources Development. Gandhi shifted Defense Minister Narasimha Rao to head this section.

A newly created ministry of transport has absorbed the individual portfolios of civil aviation, roads, railways, and shipping. Gandhi also called on N. D. Tiwari, who was chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state, to return to New Delhi to head the ministry of industries, the portfolio he had held until last year.

The cabinet reorganization was announced on the same day as voters in the violence-stricken state of Punjab went to the polls for the first time since the state was put under presidential rule in 1983. Returns from the elections show that the Sikh moderate party, Akali Dal, is heading for a landslide victory. But the elections and the high voter turnout of 60%, are a major victory for Prime Minister Gandhi. Campaigning in Punjab Sept. 16-18, Gandhi called upon Punjabis to "tackle the plague of terrorism with your vote." He proceeded with the elec-

tions despite the Aug. 20 murder of Akali Dal leader Sant Harchand Singh Longoval, and the naysayers in the international press who said Gandhi was moving "too quickly" to resolve the Sikh dispute.

The elections, Mr. Gandhi explained in an interview with a Kuwaiti newspaper in early September, "will prove and show that the people of Punjab are not with this movement [of Sikh separatism], and that there is a definite difference between the extremist, the terrorist, and the rest of the Akalis and the rest of the Sikhs. . . . The extremists constitute a tiny minority of criminals with little or no public support among the people of Punjab. These terrorists are attempting to subvert the democratic process by violence. The challenge has to be met, not giving in to the blackmail of terrorism."

The agreement with the Akali Dal reached with Longoval a week before his murder, Gandhi pointed out, "sets the democratic process back on its feet and has opened the way to a free and fearless expression of opinion by the people through the polls that will be held."

Events have proven Mr. Gandhi right. The call for a boycott by the United Akali Dal, under the leadership of Joginder Singh, the father of slain terrorist Sant Bhindranwale, was largely ignored. The elections took place peacefully, with 100,000 army troops on hand to ensure law and order. Although the Akali Dal has won the majority of state assembly races and taken 6 out of 10 parliamentary races, the election process and the steady improvement in the Punjab situation has proven Mr. Gandhi's credentials as a statesman, determined to unite India as the prerequisite to moving forward domestically and internationally.