

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Cleaning up the Golden Temple

Security forces have laid siege to terrorists safehoused in the Sikh shrine, but will it stop the trouble in Punjab?

On May 9, Indian security forces, including the crack "Black Cat" commando unit, laid siege to the Golden Temple in Amritsar to "flush out" terrorists holed up there. It was estimated that at least 60-70 hardcore terrorists, along with another 100 or so militants and a complement of sophisticated weapons, have once again turned the temple into a safehouse and an arsenal.

As of this writing, the battle of nerves and bullets between the security forces located outside the main temple area and the terrorists inside continues. It remains to be seen what the effect of even a successful action will be on the prospects for ending the turmoil in Punjab.

The daily death toll from terrorist reprisals around the state is ranging from 10-50.

More important, the critical political dimension of the problem—the fact that the political process in the state has been all but shattered—has been put into the background, if temporarily, and it is not clear whether there are any fresh initiatives in this realm to make good the gains on the law-and-order front.

Unlike 1984's "Operation Bluestar" assault on the Golden Temple, the armed forces have slowly, steadily tightened a military net around the shrine, aimed at forcing the terrorists out.

After a six-day standoff, repeated appeals resulted in a "break" when 170 people, including 118 militants—among them 25 terrorists long on the "wanted" list—left the temple and

surrendered to waiting authorities. To the credit of the security forces, the operation has involved a minimum loss of lives and almost no damage to the temple.

Punjab Director-General of Police K.P.S. Gill, commanding the operation, told reporters that preliminary screening of those who surrendered revealed that 11 belonged to the Sikatar Singh group the "Khalistan Commando Force (KCF)," including Sikatar Singh himself.

Four others belonged to another faction of the KCF, seven to the "Bhindranwale Tigers Force of Khalistan," and three to the "Khalistan Liberation Force."

All these groups are committed to a terrorist campaign to separate Punjab from the Indian Union and establish "Khalistan," a nation for the Sikhs. Gill said that 30-40 more terrorists were still inside the temple.

The siege of the Golden Temple did not appear to evoke a strong emotional reaction among the Sikhs in general. Although Sikh political figures such as Surjit Singh Barnala and Prakash Singh Badal, both former chief ministers of Punjab from the Sikh Akali Dal party, courted arrest in a march to the temple to "break" the siege, Sikhs as a whole are disgusted with the terrorist desecration of their holy shrine.

So, there were no village *jathas* (group marches) to back up the Barnalas and Badals. Those few Sikh priests who joined Barnala et al. are those associated with the Golden Temple who have long been suspected

of collaboration with the terrorists or have succumbed to their "armed might" over the years.

The security forces have had another advantage—the absence of any charismatic leader among the terrorists. The military pressure that has produced the waves of surrender has also provoked intensified factional warfare among the terrorists in the temple.

However, the absence of any commanding figure among the terrorists could also make it more difficult to stop the terrorist binge.

During the last year, terrorists have run rampant, killing more than 2,000 innocent people. As of early May, the body count showed that more than 800 civilians had been gunned down in 1988 alone.

The terrorists have also upgraded their weaponry, and are now using Chinese-made AK-47 assault rifles. Their arsenal also includes Soviet-made RPG-7 rockets and, reportedly, American Stinger missiles.

Since the "flush-out" of the terrorists from the temple was expected to come at any time, a number of terrorists either never stationed themselves there in the first place, or had relocated before the siege.

It will be a major achievement to free the central Sikh shrine of terrorist grip, and keep it that way. The government is said to be preparing a bill for Parliament to prohibit the misuse of religious places. At the same time, it is certainly an illusion to hope that normality will descend in Punjab overnight.

Delhi faces the task of starting a political process in Punjab. Operation "flush-out" may help do that, provided the economic and civil rights demands of the majority Sikh community are addressed right away. Otherwise, the positive gains achieved through the siege will evaporate.