

We smile, never weep, besieged rebel said

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AMRITSAR (Reuter) — Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the fiery Sikh preacher, died as he lived — in violence.

His bullet-riddled body and those of two close aides were found this morning in the basement of the Akal Takht, his headquarters inside the Golden Temple complex where at least 300 people were killed in hand-to-hand combat between Sikh extremists and army troops.

In what was probably his final interview last Sunday, Bhindranwale, 37, told Reuters: "We may be killed. But a Sikh never weeps. He will laugh or smile in whatever condition he is in."

As he spoke from the Akal Takht, seat of the highest Sikh order, Indian troops were crouched by sandbags outside the walled temple complex.

Dressed in a traditional loose white gown, a .45-calibre pistol beside him, Bhindranwale sat on a mattress spread on the floor with his back to a wall as teen-aged bodyguards carrying sub-machineguns milled around him.

Bhindranwale was born in the western Punjab village of Rode in 1947.

He came to be regarded as a messiah by many Sikhs in 1978 when he vowed to avenge the deaths of several of his followers in a clash between them and members of a breakaway Sikh sect called Nirankaris.

Bhindranwale, called a saint by his disciples, preached fundamentalism and until the end opposed the moderate wing of the Sikhs' main party, the Akali Dal.

"All men are born Sikhs, it is only the scissors which disfigure the others," he once said. Sikhs are forbidden by their religion from cutting their hair.

Indian political analysts said Bhindranwale was likely to be more of a force in death than in life. "His martyrdom is certain to attract more Sikhs to the cause," one of them said.

Many of Bhindranwale's supporters advocated creation of a separate Sikh state, to be called Khalistan, through violence.