

Ontario Sikhs gather to protest India's storming of holy temple

By Peter Rickwood Toronto Star

Sikhs from across Ontario, many wearing black armbands in mourning and ceremonial daggers, shouted their outrage in Toronto yesterday at the storming of their holiest shrine by the Indian army.

The emotional protest by hundreds of men, women and children in front of the Indian consulate at Yonge and Bloor Sts. passed without incident on the site where violence had marred a 1982 Sikh demonstration.

A large contingent of Metro police looked on as the angry crowd, carrying placards condemning the

attack, chanted slogans against the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her decision to send troops into Amritsar's Golden Temple.

Two uniformed Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers were on duty outside the 29th-floor consulate offices where a man went on a rampage the previous day, smashing pictures and overturning furniture.

In November, 1982, two people were shot, including one plainclothes policeman, during a similar demonstration.

"There will be no violence in Canada," pledged Gurdep Singh Upnagra, vice-president of the Federation of Sikh Societies in Canada in an interview as shoppers dodged demonstrators to get into Hudson's Bay Centre.

But the fall of the sacred temple and the deaths of hundreds of Sikhs will only reinforce the Sikh resolve to seek independence, Sunagra said. "We don't want to live with India any more, we want separation, we want our Palestine," he declared.

In Ottawa, where a smaller demonstration was held, Dr. Bakhshish Samagh, secretary of the Sikh federation, said the Golden Temple "is like the Vatican for us.

"If St. Peter's church in the Vatican is destroyed today, what will happen with Catholics?" he asked.

The Indian army seized control of the 6-square-hectare (15-acre) Golden Temple complex in Amritsar Wednesday in a battle that claimed more than 300 lives, including that of Sikh militant leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

The bullet-riddled body of the 37-year-old fundamentalist preacher, the leader of a two-year terrorist campaign for greater Sikh rights that has claimed hundreds of lives, was found in the temple's throne room.

Upnagra said the slain Sikh leader "was not a political leader, he was a saint. And we will always follow him."

"The Spirit of Martyrs Will Haunt You Indira", proclaimed one of the placards carried by demonstrators in Toronto yesterday.

Gandhi was the target of most of the hostility and a picture of her was burned at the protest.

Individual demonstrators, many of whom have relatives in Punjab — the Sikh homeland in northern India and centre of the violence — said they were shocked and horrified by the events in Amritsar.