

Death toll at temple 1,000 as India plans special force

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From AP, Reuter and New York Times

AMRITSAR — Almost 800 Sikh militants and 200 soldiers were killed last week in an Indian Army assault on the Sikhs' sacred Golden Temple in Punjab and hundreds of people were wounded, army and police sources said yesterday.

At least 20 more were killed on Saturday night as troops attempted to hold down violent reaction to the assault. Sniper fire persisted yesterday.

In the northeastern state of Bihar, an army commander was shot dead and Sikh troops deserted his unit, the Government said. The mutineers were "on the way to Delhi with arms."

The Government also said it has decided to form a 23,000-man special force, to be called the National Security Guard, to suppress sectarian violence.

Bodies still were being removed from the holy lake surrounding the seventeenth-century shrine and up to 50 at a time are being cremated because there is not enough wood for individual funeral pyres, the army and police sources said.

Garbage trucks have taken away 780 bodies to be cremated.

More than 500 soldiers were wounded in the attack on the temple, the holiest shrine in the Sikh faith, but a place also where many Sikh extremists sought haven and where they stored their weapons.

The army has said officially that 300 to 400 Sikhs and 59 soldiers were killed in the siege last Tuesday and Wednesday.

The soldiers shot their way into the white marble and burnished copper temple after being driven back twice. At least one tank and one armored personnel carrier were destroyed by militants using Belgian-made anti-tank missiles, they said.

Some of the Sikhs were slain by followers of militant leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale when they tried to surrender, the sources said.

Mr. Bhindranwale was found dead in the temple's Akal Takht or "immortal seat" of the

five high priests.

The temple battle climaxed increasing violence in Punjab that left some 300 people killed in the past three months. Most of the victims were Hindus slain by Sikh extremists.

Mr. Bhindranwale's followers made three attempts to kill moderate Sikh leaders Harchand Singh Longowal and Gurcharan Singh Tohra, said Amritsar police Superintendent Sital Das.

Mr. Longowal, president of the Sikhs' Akali Dal political party, and Mr. Tohra, president of the temple management committee, surrendered to the army and are in jail in Rajasthan.

The Akali Dal had led the Sikh agitation for more religious and political autonomy for the 13 million Sikhs in this country of 750 million people.

There were conflicting reports in Amritsar about Mr. Bhindranwale's death. One version is that he and his two top lieutenants had formed a pact and killed each other. Another is that he was killed in a prolonged burst of army gunfire when soldiers found him.

Mr. Bhindranwale was wearing a flowing white robe and a blue turban, the sources said, and the left side of his face was shot off.

Some scattered fighting continued in the Golden Temple area. On Friday, Sikh militants fired three rockets at a military post, killing a soldier who was brushing his teeth and seriously wounding a civilian, the sources said.