

125 Sikhs arrested on march

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From AP and Reuter

AMRITSAR, India — A self-styled "suicide squad" of 125 elderly Sikh women were arrested last night in an attempt to march to the Golden Temple to wrest it from army occupation.

Authorities imposed a curfew until 11 a.m. today to stop further Sikh protest marches to the temple, Sikhdom's holiest shrine. But Sikh sources said they expect more volunteers to troop there in "martyrs' brigades" and be arrested today.

The march orders came after talks on the withdrawal of troops broke off.

The marchers, mostly women and a handful of men dressed in saffron and black to denote martyrdom and protest, were seized as soon as they left another Sikh shrine, the Sahidan, about 1½ kilometres from the Golden Temple.

Rajinder Kaur, president of the women's section of the Akali Dal, the main Sikh political party, had said the unarmed women were prepared to "face bullets" during their march.

Instead they were arrested as they walked in groups of five out of the shrine and were taken away in buses, shouting "Down with (Prime Minister) Indira Gandhi!" and "President Zail Singh is a traitor!"

Other protesters wept.

About 2,000 police and soldiers, some with automatic weapons, had surrounded the Sahidan and blocked off all roads around it. In addition, 50 women commandos trained in karate were deployed at the shrine.

The Government agreed to allow about 300 orthodox Sikhs, known as Nihangs, to undertake repair of the temple under army supervision today. The Akali Dal and other Sikh factions condemned them as traitors for starting such work before the army withdraws.

"We spit at them," Mrs. Kaur said.

"The talks have broken down. We are going ahead with our program to march because the army is not listening to our demands and we are defeated in talks."

She was arrested, but not before she told a group of women they should march peacefully to the Golden Temple: "We will pray and face bullets."

The Akalis demanded that the army stop repairs on the battle-marked temple and leave the work to the Sikh community as its traditional responsibility.

The army said that before it withdraws it wants assurances from Sikh leaders that the temple will not again become a haven for Sikh extremists and criminals, a command post for terrorists and an arsenal.

The Indian Express newspaper said yesterday that a tentative agreement has been reached whereby the army would withdraw and Sikh leaders would promise that the temple would not be used for political purposes. Under the proposed agreement no weapons would be permitted inside the temple, and in case of trouble, authorities would be allowed to enter after consulting temple leaders.

No new talks were scheduled.

The army has occupied the shrine since crack troops stormed it on June 6 to root out Sikh extremists based there. Several buildings in the complex were severely damaged in the attack.