

Sikh militants freed by army; troops prepare to quit Punjab

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From Associated Press and Reuter

AMRITSAR, India — Military authorities yesterday freed 80 Sikh militants captured during the army's assault on the sacred Golden Temple in Amritsar. Two hundred other militants picked up in sweeps throughout Punjab state were handed over to police.

At the same time, Lt.-Gen. Krishnaswamy Sundarji announced the army would hand over control of the 12-block temple compound to police and paramilitary personnel in a few weeks, after rounding up the last of what he called Sikh terrorists from the countryside.

"Once we have flushed out the extremists we will start withdrawing in a phased manner," he said at a news conference. "I hope in some weeks we will return to the barracks."

The Press Trust of India news agency said the Government expected normal rail and bus traffic to resume throughout Punjab today, ending a curfew imposed when troops were sent into the troubled state on June 2 after local authorities proved unable to control Sikh extremists. The first train into Amritsar would probably carry urgently needed gasoline, cooking oil and sugar, PTI said.

The 80 militants released yesterday were the first of 1,600 Sikhs in custody to be set free.

Since the army moved in, troops have searched 39 Sikh temples and four or five Hindu shrines as well as villages throughout Punjab, General Sundarji said.

Sikhs have been agitating for religious and political concessions from the Government for Punjab, where Sikhs are a slight majority. Some have campaigned for outright secession, while others have pressed for a Vatican-like status for the holy city of Amritsar and a constitutional acknowledgement that their religion is distinct from Hinduism.

In New Delhi, authorities increased security for Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, whose life has been threatened. A commando squad was stationed at her official residence and armed police patrolled roads leading to her house.

In an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. on Sunday, Mrs. Gandhi denied that the army's storming of the Golden Temple — the holiest of Sikh shrines — had alienated the Sikh community from the Government, but acknowledged that "large numbers" of Sikhs were upset by the army action.