

Diamonds and the Smell of Death

The army cleans up, as calm returns to Punjab

The guns fell silent last week around the Sikhs' Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, Punjab, leaving a tentative, uneasy calm in their wake. Steel-helmeted troops were positioned on many street corners, ready to quell any new outbreak of violence. The revered Golden Temple remained intact, but surrounding buildings lay in ruins or were seriously damaged. The destruction was a testament to the bloody battle that raged there for 36 hours earlier this month, after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the army to attack more than 1,000 heavily armed Sikh extremists barricaded inside the temple grounds. The latest casualty figures: 582 dead and 753 wounded. Among the dead, shot through the right temple according to one general on the scene, was Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the fanatical leader of the extremists.

For 14 days the government had imposed a ban on any news coming out of Punjab. But last week a small pool of Western and Indian journalists was flown into Amritsar by the Indian government to view the scars of battle. No cameras were allowed, and journalists were not permitted to question officials. Taking great care to preserve the sanctity of the Golden Temple, soldiers mopped blood off the ornate marble floors and cremated the last of the bodies on funeral pyres. Almost all the buildings around the temple complex had sustained damage, including the observation tower and water tower, the first structures to be hit by army rockets. The Akal Takht, the second-holiest place within the complex, where much of the fiercest fighting took place, was devastated beyond recognition. One floor was ankle-deep in spent shells, empty cartridges and machine-gun clips; balconies had been showered with splintered glass; walls were black with smoke; once delicate ornamental writing and splendid furniture were gone. An army officer said 50 soldiers and Sikhs had been killed and 200 wounded in the storming of the building. "I lost 17 of my choicest men," he said. "They were hurling grenades at my men."

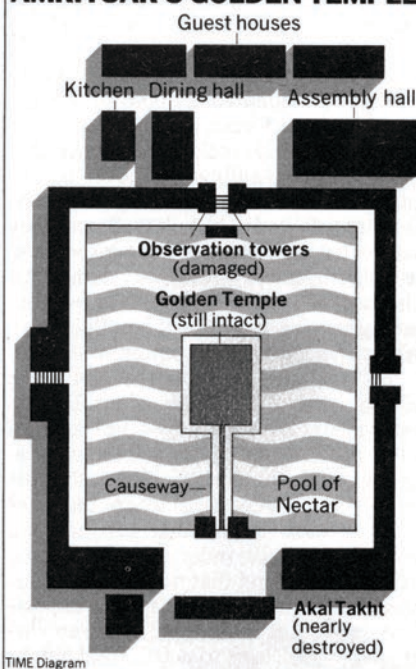
As the journalists climbed the Akal Takht's narrow stairs, they were overcome by the lingering smell of death: many bodies had lain for days, trapped in the rubble. Frogmen dived in the Pool of Nectar surrounding the Golden Temple in search of more bodies and found \$300,000 in rupees, almost 9 lbs. of gold and a sack of diamonds. A high-frequency transmitter and a teleprinter were also discovered in a well and in the temple lodgings. In other areas of the temple grounds, troops uncovered cache after

cache of arms and ammunition, including a grenade factory that had been operated by Bhindranwale's followers. But the gold-domed temple proper, which sits in the center of the complex, was unmarked by the battle. Government spokesmen stressed that the army had gone to great efforts to preserve the sanctuary, even taking more casualties than would have been normal in order to preserve it. Many Sikhs, however, were unimpressed. "It is the same as telling a Catholic," said one



Uncovered in the temple: grenades, guns and explosives

AMRITSAR'S GOLDEN TEMPLE



Sikh at the temple, "that St. Peter's remains, but the Sistine Chapel is gone."

When the government-imposed curfew was finally lifted in some parts of Punjab, Sikhs emerged profoundly shaken, yet more strongly united by a sense of alienation. In eight separate incidents, young Sikh army recruits mutinied and deserted in protest. Some raided army arsenals or attacked non-Sikh troops. By week's end, 3,097 Sikhs had been arrested as deserters and another 55 killed in shootouts with loyal army units.

Mrs. Gandhi insisted her decision to storm the temple complex was the right and only one. She had failed in her attempts to negotiate with the Sikhs' Akali Dal Party over demands for increased water and territorial rights, social and linguistic concessions and exclusive control of the Punjabi capital, Chandigarh, all of which had sparked the violence. By early this year, it was apparent to her that Bhindranwale had become so popular he had usurped the Akali's authority, leaving the party impotent in negotiations and fearful of his violent fanaticism. No matter how long she talked to the Akalis, Mrs. Gandhi concluded, they could never deliver on an agreement that would hold while Bhindranwale was alive. And giving in totally to Sikh demands, Mrs. Gandhi believed, would have encouraged other Indian communal groups to extremism.

In making her decision to attack, the Prime Minister relied largely on Indian intelligence reports indicating that Bhindranwale and his followers were stockpiling vast quantities of weapons inside the temple. Said one report: "Bhindranwale has an arsenal of weapons any guerrilla army in the Third World would be proud to call its own. He is preparing to attack the government."

Intelligence sources also showed that the temple had become a haven for smugglers who had helped the militants finance their arms buildup through the transport and sale of heroin, hashish, and stolen gold, silver and jewels. Furthermore, reports claimed, the smugglers took Sikh extremists into secret camps in Pakistan and in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, where they received military training. Mrs. Gandhi has not accused the Pakistani government of complicity in the Sikh extremist movement, which the Pakistanis have denied anyway.

Well aware of the pain she has inflicted in the cause of maintaining unity in the world's largest democracy, Mrs. Gandhi has indicated that she will eventually reopen negotiations with the Sikhs and reconsider their demands. "We are all bruised," said one top-level Indian official. "We have killed our own people. India's future and its soul now depends on our humanity, on gentle, forgiving, patient wisdom."

—By Laura López.

Reported by Dean Brellis/New Delhi