

Army storms Sikh shrine in Punjab

NEW DELHI (DPA-AP) — Special units of the Indian army backed by tanks today stormed the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the fortress-like complex in Punjab held by an estimated 3,000 Sikhs.

All-India radio reported that Sikh extremists fired machine guns and rockets at troops besieging their holiest shrine, and that fighting was still raging.

The report said some Sikhs holed up in the 17th century compound had surrendered and told officials the remaining occupants planned "to blow up the Golden Temple." It did not give details.

The 15-acre compound is located in Amritsar, 400 kilometres (250 miles) northwest of New Delhi.

The official broadcast said "terrorists are firing machine guns and have used rockets" in fierce firefights with the security forces. The military gave no details of casualties on either side. No foreign journalists were allowed near the area and independent reports of the battles could not be obtained.

Leader in hiding

In New Delhi, an official spokesman told United Press International that security forces did not enter the Golden Temple, where militant Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale — a fundamentalist priest and the alleged mastermind behind Punjab's wave of violence — reportedly was taking shelter.

In operations throughout Sikh-dominated Punjab state, army units also broke into at least 24 of the 32 other Sikh shrines under siege, arresting hundreds of people and capturing large quantities of arms and ammunition, the reports said.

Sporadic fighting was also reported outside some of the temples as army and police broke up demonstrations.

Government officials said Harchand Singh Longowal, president of the Sikh's Akali Dal political party, and another key Sikh leader, Gurcharan Singh Tohra, had surrendered.

But Bhindranwale was still believed to be holed up in the innermost sanctuary of the Golden Temple. He has vowed to kill himself rather than be captured or have his men lay down their arms.

The white marble temple with a copper dome covers an area of about 12 city blocks and is surrounded on all sides by a lake where worshippers bathe to wash away their sins.

The Sikhs are a minority in India, but they form a 52-per-cent majority of the population in Punjab, where their Akali Dal party is seeking religious and political autonomy.