

250 militants die as troops storm temple

From Associated Press and Reuter

NEW DELHI — Indian Government troops backed by rocket and tank fire invaded the Golden Temple compound in the Sikh holy city of Amritsar yesterday, killing 250 Sikh militants, capturing 450 others and seizing heavy weapons, officials said. At least 48 soldiers were reported killed.

Fierce fighting raged into the night inside the 12-block-square compound as machine-gun-firing extremists held out in the golden-domed temple at the heart of the

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most sacred Sikh shrine in Punjab state.

Lt.-Gen. K. Sunderji told reporters in the Punjabi capital of Chandigarh that 48 soldiers were killed and 12 others missing are presumed dead. At least 100 soldiers and 50 militants were wounded, 450 people arrested and nearly 300 firearms seized, including an unspecified number of anti-tank missiles and rocket launchers, he said.

Troops also attacked 38 other Sikh shrines, five Hindu temples and one mosque in other areas of the troubled state, he said, adding there were no casualties.

Among those captured at the Golden Temple was Harchand Singh Longowal, president of the Sikhs' main political party, the Akali Dal.

H. K. Wali, a Government

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spokesman, said a group of defiant militants barricaded inside the heart of the temple, the Akal Takht or Seat of Immortal Power, were the last to surrender. He could not confirm reports that radical Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was among those holed up. Mr. Bhindranwale, who is accused of masterminding a terrorist campaign that has claimed at least 350 lives in Punjab in the past six months, has lived in the Akal Takht for the past three months.

Meanwhile, the Indian consulate in Vancouver was closed by Sikhs protesting against the attack. About 250 Sikhs jammed both entrances to the downtown consulate and prevented staff from entering. About 250 B.C. Sikhs visiting Punjab are believed trapped in the state by a round-the-clock curfew imposed on Sunday.

In addition to the shoot-on-sight curfew, authorities have suspended all rail and road traffic in the state, sealed the borders, banned journalists and declared the region off-limits to foreigners. Thousand of troops were sent in on the weekend.

Sikh militants in India had threatened a bloodbath if the Golden Temple was attacked. The seventeenth-century shrine is the headquarters of a two-year-long agitation for greater political, economic and religious autonomy in Punjab, the only Indian state in which Sikhs are a majority.

Mr. Wali said he believes the raid had quashed Sikh terrorism. "An act here and there can not be discounted, but we believe this will break the back of the terrorist movement."

Troops took heavy casualties, he said, because they had avoided firing on the temple itself. "They became easy targets because they did not do what in a warlike situation an army would do — that is, obliterate the target."

Lt.-Gen. Ranjit Singh Dayal, a Sikh who was appointed security adviser in Punjab last weekend, said army tanks fired on rebel positions in the temple compound but no tanks entered the grounds. Troops also fired rockets to destroy fortifications, he said.

News of the military action spread quickly through India's Sikh community, touching off violence in several areas.