

Sikhs vanish in Indian crackdown

By Mary Anne Weaver
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AMRITSAR, India — Thousands of people have disappeared from India's Punjab state since the raid on the Sikhs' Golden Temple seven weeks ago, Sikh sources say.

The Indian army has been engaged in a massive flushing-out operation aimed at Sikh extremists. In some villages men between 15 and 35 have been bound, blindfolded and taken away, the sources say. Their fate is unknown.

Sikh leaders say worsening relations between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government and the Punjab's 9.4 million Sikhs was illustrated recently in the tiny village of Kaimbwala. One evening during prayers, 300 troops entered the small temple, blindfolded the 30 worshippers and pushed them into the street. According to the local priest, Sant Pritpal Singh, the villagers were given electric shocks and interrogated about the whereabouts of Sikh militants.

Guirnam Singh, a 37-year-old landowner, was held in an army camp for 13 days. Last week, his face bruised and his arms and legs dotted with burns, he said he had been hung upside-down and beaten.

Inside the army's bustling operations centre in the capital of Chandigarh, troops' morale is beginning to suffer. In the past two weeks, two officers and six men have been killed on routine patrol. There have also been desertions and raids on armories.

In private conversation, officers bristle at the failure of civilian intelligence which they say was largely responsible for the 1,000 deaths inside Amritsar's Golden Temple during "Operation Blue Star," the raid which ended Sikh extremists' siege of the 72-acre temple complex.

Faulty map

The army was told that followers of Sikh leader Sant Jarnail Bhindranwale had seven light machineguns at most; once in the temple, they found that one building alone contained 25.

Months of careful preparation at a life-size replica of the Golden Temple in Uttar Pradesh's Chakrata Hills was based on a faulty map of the temple complex. Two crucial entrances were not shown and waves of troops entered the complex in the face of direct gunfire. In the first nine minutes of battle, 60 soldiers were killed or wounded.

Neither did the army anticipate that it would be fighting its own men. Inside the besieged temple were four retired Indian army generals and at least 14 retired colonels — all devotedly loyal to Bhindranwale.

Under the direction of a retired officer, Maj.-Gen. Shuhbeg Singh, they had fortified the temple and provided the extremists with vast caches of arms. The bulk of weapons recovered from the complex were from Indian army stocks.

Meanwhile, a story that "Bhindranwale lives" continues to spread through the Punjab's prosperous villages. Last week, two reliable Sikhs — a lawyer and an air force officer — said there were curious omissions in Bhindranwale's "post-mortem report." Fingerprints were taken, and the report allegedly classified the body's hair as "black, streaked with gray."

Bhindranwale was bald.



New tensions: Gandhi's drive to flush out Sikh extremist followers of Bhindranwale has upset Punjab's 9.4 million Sikhs.