

Head priests expel Sikh warrior chief

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AMRITSAR, India (UPI) — The five head priests of the Sikh religion yesterday excommunicated a maverick warrior chief who recruited thousands of followers to repair the Golden Temple, the sect's holiest shrine.

"Bhai (brother) Santa Singh is being excommunicated from the Sikh order in view of his grave offence," the priests said.

The priests called on all Sikhs to dissociate themselves from the repairs being done on the temple, damaged in early June when government troops stormed the 15-acre Golden Temple complex to expel Sikh extremists using it as a base for a terrorist campaign for increased autonomy for Punjab state.

The priests had said the troops must withdraw from the temple before repairs could begin.

The renegade Sikh chief, Baba Santa Singh, for a sixth straight day led volunteers in work on the temple in defiance of the priests.

"They had no right to take such an action," Singh said.

The repairs began Tuesday when Singh led about 200 volunteers to the temple. By yesterday, the number of volunteers swelled to 10,000, as Sikhs from all over Punjab converged on Amritsar, 400 km (250 miles) northwest of New Delhi. Sikhs are a majority in the northern state.