

Gandhi Still Faces Obstacles To Peace Despite Punjab Triumph

By Chaitanya Kalbag

NEW DELHI (Reuters)—Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's peace pact to end three years of sectarian turmoil in Punjab has won wide support but analysts say he still faces obstacles in curbing Sikh unrest.

Gandhi, a former airline pilot with five years in politics and eight months in power, confounded critics Wednesday by defusing an explosive situation that had frustrated his more experienced mother and led to her death last October.

The 40-year-old leader inherited a strife-torn Punjab when Indira Gandhi was assassinated by Sikh bodyguards last Oct. 31, five months after she ordered troops to storm the Golden Temple, the Sikhs' holiest shrine.

About 1,000 people died in the temple

attack and in riots following Gandhi's [^] ihey^ten't^lk the same language as the murder more than 2,700 Sikh\$T0||Jfj&stWt^^ They talk with guns." killed. The agreement was labelled a "sell

Gandhi took a soft line in his first speeches, soothing Sikh nerves and pledging to give the Punjab situation top priority.

Under the 11-point pact, hammered out over two days of talks with Sikh leader Harchand Singh Longowal, the government referred demands for territorial and political autonomy to official commissions.

It pledged to widen the probe into the anti-Sikh riots, and withdrew sweeping security powers given troops in Punjab.

It also agreed to designate Chandigarh, the joint capital of Punjab and neighboring Haryana state, as Punjab's alone.

Opponents and supporters hailed the signing of the accord.

Madhu Dandavate, leader of the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party, said opposition parties were in total agreement with the settlement.

Political analysts said Gandhi's breakthrough may have pulled faltering Sikh TM nd prates back from the precipice of

tied militants might launch a last-ditch assault to gain their objective—an independent Sikh state.

The analysts said Longowal faced a potential revolt within the ranks of his own party, the Akali Dal, which sparked the Punjab crisis in August, 1982, by starting a "dharam yudh" (war of righteousness) to secure its political and religious demands.

Two of Longowal's most powerful colleagues, former Punjab chief minister Parkash Singh Badal and Sikh temples management committee chief Gurchar-an Singh Tohra, stayed away from the Delhi talks.

"But it is more than likely that they will fall in line," prominent Sikh historian and member of parliament Khushwant Singh

out" by a breakaway Akali Dal faction said. "As for the militants, ted by Joginder Singh, whose son, extremist leader Jarnail Singh Bhindran-wale, was killed in the Golden Temple assault.

Gandhi headed off a possible backlash from Aryana, where Hindus are in the majority, by summoning its chief minister Bhajan Lal to Delhi and securing his approval for the accord

In February last year talks between the Akali Dal and the government were broken off after Hindus attacked Sikhs in Haryana, provoking bloodshed that culminated in the Golden Temple battle.

Officials said Gandhi moved quickly after the accord was signed to head off Sikh extremist violence, putting security forces in Punjab, Haryana and Delhi on alert.

Hours after the agreement was signed, residents of the rich farming state, home to most of India's 14 million Sikhs, said groups of militant youths shouted anti Longowal slogans in the sect's holy city Amritsar.