

# Gandhi resumes reconciliation ritual in Punjab

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GANDHI

NEW DELHI — Ten months after the army stormed the Sikhs' holiest shrine, Amritsar's Golden Temple, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has run up against his toughest domestic challenge so far in Punjab state.

Gandhi has pledged to give top priority to the Punjab problem. Eight leaders of the main Sikh party, the Akali Dal, were freed last month in a major initiative to restore peace in the troubled state. Gandhi also appointed a trusted follower, Arjun Singh, as Punjab's new governor.

But his conciliatory moves, including plans to revive the state's flagging economy, have been met by growing intransigence from the Sikh religious and political leadership.

"The scars run very deep," an aide to the Punjab governor who asked not to be named, told Reuters.

"If Gandhi concedes too much, he will risk weakening his bargaining position. If he concedes too little, he will provide

Sikh militants with new ammunition. He is caught between a rock and a hard place."

Political analysts said the next test for Gandhi's leadership would come this Saturday when Sikhs celebrate the start of the harvest season in the rich farming state.

The Akali Dal has threatened to launch a fresh protest campaign on April 13 if Gandhi does not concede a package of militant demands.

These include an official probe into anti-Sikh riots in which over 2,700 people died last November after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the release of all imprisoned Sikhs.

The army assault on the Golden Temple to root out Sikh extremists demanding a separate state capped a two-year-old Akali Dal campaign to secure political and religious autonomy for Punjab.

But Akali Dal President Harchand Singh Longowal, widely

considered a moderate until his arrest last June, said after his release that no talks could be held with the government on the party's original demands unless its latest ones were met.

The government has said it is willing to reconsider its refusal to investigate the post-assassination riots and will review the cases of all Sikhs in prison.

"But the gulf widens every day. It is only a matter of time before Gandhi has to accept the unpleasant fact that Punjab will be a permanent thorn in his side and there cannot be lasting peace," prominent Sikh historian Khushwant Singh said.

"Longowal and other moderate Sikh leaders are under immense pressure to adopt a more-militant-than-thou line in order to retain any following," Singh added.

Last week Gandhi received another snub when the five Sikh high priests excommunicated Agriculture Minister Buta Singh, a Sikh, for defying their authority by supervising government-backed repairs to the damaged temple complex.

The priests' action came seven months after they had declared Buta Singh a "tankhaiya" (religious sinner).

It was followed by a warning that they were planning similar punishment for President Zail Singh, also a Sikh, for awarding bravery medals to soldiers who stormed the temple.

Two weeks ago, Gandhi held consultations with major opposition leaders, saying Punjab was a national problem which required a political consensus.

Gandhi suffered another setback when a Cabinet committee he set up in January to help to resolve the crisis was boycotted by the Akali Dal and opposition groups when it visited Punjab at the weekend.

Official sources said Gandhi was likely to make his next move on Saturday when he will attend a public meeting in Amritsar to commemorate the killing by British troops of more than 300 Hindus and Sikhs protesting against colonial rule on April 13,

1919.

Gandhi's Congress (I) Party launched a peace offensive last Friday when it started a "maximum contact" programme to publicise government policies in Punjab countryside.

"In spite of what Longowal and the traditional hardliners in the Sikh community say, Mr Rajiv Gandhi knows that a confrontation is not in the best interests of the state," Punjab's main English newspaper, the Tribune, wrote.

The pro-government National Herald newspaper said: "It is time the Akali leadership returned to the negotiating table instead of hurling threats. (They) would be well advised to think coolly over the far-reaching consequences that their thoughtless plans can generate."

But the dark mood in Punjab was summed up by Longowal, who told the weekly magazine Sunday: "Every Sikh asks himself whether he has any place in this country. He nourishes anger." — Reuter

• by  
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THOUSANDS of Sikhs march through the city of Amritsar brandishing swords and chanting slogans.