

Tense Punjab state waits for an end to crisis

By CHAITANYA KALBAG in Amritsar

TWO streets from the Sikhs' holiest shrine, the Golden Temple, a soldier in olive green uniform stands atop a tall building, his binoculars trained on the clusters of worshippers who flock there every day.

In a noisy marketplace about a kilometre from the shrine an unending stream of bicycles, pushcarts and motor-rickshaws swirl around a stationary jeep carrying paramilitary troops.

Worshippers stand on a street outside the Golden Temple complex, gazing at a white-painted building whose doors and windows show scars of the fierce battle last June when the army stormed the shrine to root out Sikh extremists.

Inside one of the building's rooms, temple officials talk soothingly to a group of Sikh refugees who fled a nationwide wave of rioting after Indira Gandhi's assassination by two Sikh bodyguards three months ago.

The troops and the refugees are two knots in a tangle Indira Gandhi's son and successor, Rajiv Gandhi, must unravel before peace returns to Punjab state.

Rajiv swept to power with a record win in December's national elections, pledging to give top priority to ending the Punjab stalemate.

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tral rule imposed in October 1983 after Sikh separatist attacks, and no polling was held here during the national elections because the government feared violence.

Senior leaders of the Sikhs' main political party, the Akali Dal, arrested after the Golden Temple storming, are still in prison, and official sources said they had little hope of a resumption of negotiations on the party's demand for political and religious autonomy, broken off a year ago.

Hostile

The peace process received a further setback last month when Kirpal Singh, the most senior of the five Sikh high priests and seen as a moderate, narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by three Sikh attackers.

A few days later Rajiv, in a tough statement, ruled out any unilateral concessions by the government and said peace talks would not resume until the Akali Dal denounced extremism.

Another sign that normalcy is still far away is the government's decision to extend until April a ban on foreigners entering the state.

On the 250-km (150-mile) drive to Amritsar from Punjab's capital Chandigarh, there are few signs of the tensions that have plunged the state into frequent bloodshed.

Hardy Sikh farmers wearing colourful turbans roar down the highway past wheat and mustard fields in their tractors, and there is no sign of the army pickets that manned every major intersection after the June storming, checking all traffic.

Official sources in Chandigarh said the army had been withdrawn into barracks or was posted along the Pakistan border. But the mood turns hostile and wary at Amritsar.

It was summed up by Prem Singh Lalpura, 60, acting president of the powerful Sikh Temples Management Committee whose hard-line leader Gurcharan Singh Tohra is in prison.

"There cannot be any pre-conditions for peace talks," Lalpura said. "If Rajiv Gandhi talks of Sikh terrorism, we say the government invented terrorism. Those who killed Sikhs in the post-assassination riots were themselves terrorists."

Lalpura said negotiations could not start until the government disbanded special courts set up for secret trials of suspected Sikh extre-

mists, released hundreds of extremist suspects in prison, and punished the anti-Sikh rioters.

Sitting cross-legged on a cot in a room overlooking the calm lake that surrounds the shimmering Golden Temple, Giani Sahib Singh, one of the five high priests, listened to petitions from the faithful, gravely bending his head to catch their words.

The high priests have come to occupy a vital place in Sikh politics after the Golden Temple storming.

Riots

In September last year they successfully organised a rally in defiance of a government ban, drawing 50,000 followers, and later that month negotiated the army's withdrawal from the temple complex.

"The government alone can solve a problem it has itself created," Sahib Singh said. "We are Indians, and what happened to our people is sad."

Singh said that despite the riots there had been no anti-Hindu backlash in Sikh-majority Punjab.

"Friendship, love and compassion can bring back peace. Our hearts are clean," he said.

In Chandigarh, a senior government official said the existing Sikh political leadership had been discredited by its failure to bring peace to the troubled state.

"The only leadership that will command respect now appears to be one that takes a hard anti-government line," he said.

"What the government has to accept is that a state of continuing insurgency will prevail in Punjab, with a permanent role for the army and a section of the population that is alienated," the official added.

In a move reflecting this view, the state government this month ordered an investigation of all Sikh police officers to discover if they had links with extremists.

On Sunday state police chief K.S. Dhillon said the government would spend US\$4 million on a crash plan to end extremist attacks, and each police station would be equipped with two motor cycles fitted with wireless sets.

The Indian Express newspaper said crack police squads were also being formed to deal with surprise extremist attacks, and police would get weapons similar to those used by paramilitary troops in a bid to combat extremism.

The newspaper said the government was in contact with the jailed Akali Dal leaders and had considered releasing them but decided to wait at least until after state elections next month. —
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