

Operation Blue Star: Tenure of Smt. Indira Gandhi

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ABSTRACT

Operation Blue Star was the codename of a military operation carried out by Indian security forces between 1 and 10 June 1984 in order to remove Damdami Taksal leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers from the buildings of the Golden Temple, the holiest site for Sikhs located in Amritsar, Punjab, India. The decision to launch the operation rested with the Prime Minister of India, then Indira Gandhi,[26] who had already authorized military preparation for a confrontation at the temple complex 18 months prior according to the then-Vice Chief of the Army Staff, S. K. Sinha.[27] In July 1982, Harchand Singh Longowal, the president of the Sikh political party Shiromani Akali Dal, had invited Bhindranwale to take up residence in the Golden Temple to evade arrest by government authorities.[28][29]

Indian intelligence agencies had reported that three prominent Sikh figures; Shabeg Singh, Balbir Singh and Amrik Singh, referred to in reports as "prominent heads of the Khalistan movement"; had each made at least six trips to neighbouring Pakistan between 1981 and 1983. Shabeg Singh, an Indian Army officer who later deserted to join Bhindranwale, was identified as the provider of weapons training at Akal Takht. The Intelligence Bureau alleged that training was being provided at various gurdwaras throughout Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. Amrik Singh responded to these allegations by stating that student training camps with "traditional weapons" had existed prior for four decades at these locations.[30] The KGB intelligence agency of the Soviet Union had tipped off India's Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) about a joint operation between Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to stir separatist unrest in the Indian state of Punjab. From its interrogation of a Pakistani military officer, R&AW had received intelligence that over a thousand Special Service Group commandos of the Pakistan Army had been dispatched by the Pakistani government into Indian Punjab to assist Bhindranwale in his fight against the Indian government; however, only Sikhs within India could join Bhindranwale due to the high-level militarization of the India–Pakistan border.[citation needed] Pakistani intelligence agents were also allegedly dispatched and followed smuggling routes in Kashmir and the Kutch region of Gujarat with plans to commit sabotage.[8]

KEYWORDS: Indira Gandhi, sikh, militants, Punjab, akali dal, riots, golden temple, takt

INTRODUCTION

By 1981, the Soviets had launched Operation Kontakt, which was based on a forged document purporting to contain details of the weapons and money provided by the ISI to Sikh militants who

wanted to create an independent country.[1] In November 1982, Yuri Andropov, the General Secretary of the Communist Party and leader of the Soviet Union, approved a proposal to fabricate

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Pakistani intelligence documents detailing ISI plans to foment religious disturbances in Punjab and promote the creation of Khalistan as an independent Sikh state.[31] Indira Gandhi's decision to move troops into the Punjab was based on her taking seriously the information provided by the Soviets regarding secret CIA support for the Sikhs.[32]

On 1 June 1984, after negotiations with the militants failed, Indira Gandhi rejected the Anandpur Resolution and ordered the army to launch Operation Blue Star, simultaneously attacking scores of Sikh temples across Punjab.[33]



Akal Takht being repaired by the Indian government after the offensive; it was later pulled down and rebuilt by the Indian Sikh community.

On 1 June Indian security forces commenced Operation Blue Star when they fired into various buildings with the goal of assessing the training of the militants, which resulted in the deaths of 8 civilians.[13][34] A variety of army units and paramilitary forces surrounded the Golden Temple complex on 3 June 1984. The official stance of the army was that warnings were made to facilitate the evacuation of pilgrims but that no surrender or release occurred by June 5 at 7:00 PM.[35] However, in April 2017 the Amritsar District and Sessions Judge Gurbir Singh gave a ruling which stated that there was no evidence that the Indian army provided warnings for pilgrims to leave the temple complex before commencing their assault.[36] The army's assault on the temple complex ended on June 8. A

clean-up operation codenamed Operation Woodrose was then initiated throughout Punjab.[8]

The military action in the temple complex was criticized by Sikhs worldwide, who interpreted it as an assault on the Sikh religion.[43] Many Sikh soldiers in the army deserted their units,[44] several Sikhs resigned from civil administrative office and returned awards received from the Indian government. Five months after the operation, on 31 October 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated in an act of revenge by her two Sikh bodyguards, Satwant Singh and Beant Singh.[29] Public outcry over Gandhi's death led to a state organized pogrom leading to the killing of more than 3,000-17,000 Sikhs across India, in the ensuing 1984 anti-Sikh riots.[45]

Following the events of the 1978 Sikh-Nirankari clashes and the Dharam Yudh Morcha, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale had risen to prominence in Sikh political circles with his policy of getting the Anandpur Resolution passed, failing which he wanted to declare a separate country of Khalistan as a homeland for Sikhs.[46] Despite the resolution declaring its goals within the context of the state, and leaving the powers of Foreign Relations, Defense, Currency and General Communications subject to the jurisdiction of the central government, Indira Gandhi, the leader of the Akali Dal's rival Congress, viewed the Anandpur Sahib Resolution as a secessionist document.[47] This was despite the fact that Harchand Singh Longwal, the leader of the Akali Dal, stated that "Let us make it clear once and for all that the Sikhs have no designs to get away from India in any manner. What they simply want is that they should be allowed to live within India as Sikhs, free from all direct and indirect interference and tampering with their religious way of life. Undoubtedly, the Sikhs have the same nationality as other Indians." [48]

One of the main aims of the KGB active measures in the early 1980s was to manufacture evidence that the CIA and Pakistani intelligence were behind the growth of Sikh separatism in Punjab.[1] In 1981 the Soviets launched Operation Kontakt that was based on a forged document purporting to contain details of the weapons and money provided by the ISI to Sikh militants who wanted to create an independent country.[1] According to agent reports, the level of anxiety in the Indian embassy regarding Pakistani support for Sikh separatists indicated that KONTAKT was successfully achieving its goals of creating an alarmist effect.[1] The Soviets used a new recruit in the New Delhi residency named "Agent S" who was close to Indira Gandhi as a major channel for providing her disinformation.[1] Agent S provided

Indira Gandhi with false documents purporting to show Pakistani involvement in the Khalistan conspiracy.[1] In November 1982 Yuri Andropov, the leader of the Soviet Union, approved a proposal to fabricate Pakistani intelligence documents detailing ISI plans to foment religious disturbances in Punjab and promote the creation of Khalistan as an independent Sikh state.[31] The KGB became confident that it could continue to deceive Indira Gandhi indefinitely with fabricated reports of CIA and Pakistani conspiracies against her.[31] The Soviets persuaded Rajiv Gandhi during a visit to Moscow in 1983 that the CIA was engaged in subversion in the Punjab.[31] When Rajiv Gandhi returned to India, he declared this to be true.[31] Indira Gandhi's decision to move troops into the Punjab was based on her taking seriously the disinformation provided by the Soviets regarding secret CIA support for the Sikhs.[32] The KGB was responsible for Indira Gandhi exaggerating the threats posed by both the CIA and Pakistan.[32] The KGB role in facilitating Operation Bluestar was acknowledged by Subramanian Swamy who stated in 1992 "The 1984 Operation Bluestar became necessary because of the vast disinformation against Sant Bhindranwale by the KGB, and repeated inside Parliament by the Congress Party of India." [49]

In July 1982, the then President of Shiromani Akali Dal, Harchand Singh Longowal, invited Bhindranwale to take up residence at the Golden Temple complex. He called Bhindranwale "our stave to beat the government." [50] On 19 July 1982, Bhindranwale took shelter with approximately 200 armed followers in the Guru Nanak Niwas (Guest house), in the precincts of the Golden Temple. Bhindranwale had made Golden Temple complex his headquarters.[51] From there he met and was interviewed by international television crews.[52] Since the 1978 clashes, after which the Sant Nirankaris were acquitted despite initiating the clash, Bhindranwale's followers had begun keeping firearms and fortified the Gurdwara that served as the headquarters of the Damdami Taksal religious center.[51]

Discussion

On 23 April 1983, Punjab Police Deputy Inspector General A. S. Atwal was shot dead by a gunman in the complex as he left the Harmandir Sahib compound.[53] The following day, Longowal accused Bhindranwale of involvement in the murder.[54][55] The Punjab Assembly noted that the murder in the temple premises confirmed the charges that the extremists were being sheltered and given active support in religious places and the Guru Nanak

Niwas, while Bhindranwale was openly supporting such elements.[56][55] After the murder of six Hindu bus passengers in October 1983, President's rule was imposed in Punjab.[57] This led to increasing communal tension between Sikhs and Hindus as Hindu mobs in Karnal, Haryana murdered 8 Sikhs and set fire to a Gurdwara on February 19, 1984.[58]

During debate in the Parliament of India members of both houses demanded the arrest of Bhindranwale. Sensing a prospect of his arrest from the hostel premises, he convinced SGPC president Tohra to set up his headquarter in Akal Takht (a shrine representing the temporal power of God) in the Golden Temple.[59] The temple high priest protested this move as a sacrilege since no Guru or leader ever resided in the Akal Takht on the floor above Granth Sahib, but Tohra agreed to Bhindranwale's demand to prevent his arrest.[59] On 15 December 1983, Bhindranwale was asked to move out of Guru Nanak Niwas house by members of the Babbar Khalsa, who opposed Bhindranwale,[60] who acted with Longowal's support. Longowal by now feared for his own safety.[61] Tohra convinced the high priest to allow Bhindranwale to reside on the first floor of Akal Takht, as he had nowhere to go to avoid arrest.[59] He said that he had to move to Akal Takht as Morcha director Longowal was negotiating with the government for his arrest.[59] The government said Bhindranwale and his followers had made the Golden Temple complex an armoury[62] and headquarters,[61][verification needed] though amassing arms and usage as a base for waging war was part of the tradition of most historical gurdwaras, which display weapons caches used by the Gurus, depicting the centrality of Sikh sites to their struggles.[63]



Golden temple Implications

A few leaders raised their voice against Bhindranwale in the Akal Takht complex and other gurdwaras

across the state.[clarification needed] Among the prominent ones was Giani Partap Singh, a spiritual leader and former Jathedar of the Akal Takht, who criticized Bhindranwale for keeping guns in the in the Akal Takht. Partap was later killed along with other dissenters including Harbans Singh Manchanda, the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee president,[64] Niranjana Singh, the Granthi of Gurudwara Toot Sahib, Granthi Jarnail Singh of Valtoha and Granthi Surat Singh of Majauli.[citation needed]

The militants were able to claim safe haven in the most sacred place for the Sikhs due to the whole or partial support received by them from key Sikh religious leaders and institutions such as the SGPC, AISSF and Jathedar (head) of the Akal Takht. The support was either voluntary or forced by using violence or threat of violence.[63]

Operation Blue Star was launched to remove Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers who had sought cover in the Amritsar Harmandir Sahib Complex.

On 3 June, a 36-hour curfew was imposed on the state of Punjab with all methods of communication and public travel suspended.[88] The electricity supply was also interrupted, creating a total blackout and cutting off the state from the rest of the world.[89] Complete media censorship was enforced.[89]

The army stormed Harmandir Sahib on the night of 5 June under the command of Kuldeep Singh Brar. The forces had full control of Harmandir Sahib by the morning of 7 June. There were casualties among the army, civilians, and militants. Sikh leaders Bhindranwale and Shabeg Singh were killed in the operation.[90]

The armed Sikhs within the Harmandir Sahib were led by Bhindranwale, former Maj. Gen. Shabeg Singh, and Amrik Singh, the President of the All India Sikh Students Federation from Damdami Taksal.

General Arun Shridhar Vaidya was the Chief of the Indian Army. General Vaidya, assisted by Lt. Gen. Sundarji as Vice-Chief, planned and coordinated Operation Blue Star.[91] From the Indian Army Lt. Gen. Kuldeep Singh Brar had command of the action, operating under General Krishnaswamy Sundarji. On 31 May he had been summoned from Meerut and asked to lead the operation to remove the militants from the temple. Brar was a Jat Sikh, the same caste as Bhindranwale, and was also acquainted with Shabeg Singh, having been his student at the Indian Military Academy at Dehradun.[76] Among the six

generals leading the operation, four were Sikhs.[92]:175

Operation Metal: To take out the militants including Bhindranwale from the Golden Temple complex. Brar's 9 Infantry Division was deputed for this.

Operation Shop: To attack extremist areas throughout the Punjab state and deal with remaining militants in the countryside.

In addition, the army carried out Operation Woodrose, in which units were deployed to the border areas, replacing the pickets routinely held by the paramilitary Border Security Force. The border pickets were held in at least company strength.[93]

Results

1 June

On 1 June 1984 the Indian security forces fired into various buildings with the goal of assessing the training of the militants.[13][34] Eyewitness testimony of pilgrims inside the temple complex state that the Harmandir Sahib was fired on initially by security forces on 1 June and not 5 June as reported by the army. [34] The exercise lasted for seven hours and resulted in the main shrine of the Harmandir Sahib sustaining 34 bullet marks.[13] The action claimed the lives of eight pilgrims, including a woman and a child, inside the temple complex and injured 25 others.[13] Devinder Singh Duggal, who was in-charge of the Sikh Reference Library located inside of the Golden Temple complex and an eye-witness to Operation Blue Star stated that the militants were given instructions to not fire until the army or security forces entered the temple.[13][94] Duggal stated "...when I heard in the news bulletin that there was unprovoked firing from inside the Temple, but that the security forces showed extreme restraint and did not fire a single shot, I was surprised at this naked lie".[94] The deaths of at least three of the pilgrims was confirmed by the eyewitness testimony of a female Sikh student who had dressed their wounds and who later witnessed their deaths in Guru Nanak Nivas.[94] Furthermore, Duggal stated that on 2 June 1984 a team of the BBC, including Mark Tully, were taken around the Darbar Sahib and shown 34 holes, some of them as big as three inches in diameter, caused by the bullets on all sides of the temple.[95] Mark Tully noted, "The C.R.P.F. firing took place four days before the army actually entered the Temple".[95]

2 June

The army had already sealed the international border from Kashmir to Ganga Nagar, Rajasthan. At least seven divisions of troops were deployed in villages of Punjab. The soldiers began taking control of the city

of Amritsar from the paramilitary. A young Sikh officer posing as a pilgrim was sent in to reconnoitre the temple. He spent an hour in the complex noting defensive preparations. Plans were made to clear vantage points occupied by militants outside the complex before the main assault. Patrols were also sent to study these locations.[76]

As the Indian army was sealing off exits out of Amritsar, it continued to allow pilgrims to enter the temple complex.[96] All outgoing trains from Amritsar had left by noon and other trains were cancelled.[96] The CRPF outside the temple had been replaced by the army who were taking into custody any visitors leaving the temple.[96] A pilgrim who survived the assault stated that he did not leave the temple because of the detention of visitors by the army.[96]

By nightfall media and the press were gagged and rail, road and air services in Punjab were suspended. Foreigners and NRIs were denied entry. General Gauri Shankar was appointed as the Security Advisor to the Governor of Punjab. The water and electricity supply was cut off.[97][98][99]

3 June

According to an All Sikhs Student Federation member, 10,000 people had come from outside including many women and 4000 of them were young people.[96] The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee estimates that approximately 10,000 to 15,000 pilgrims had come from Punjab's cities and villages to attend the Gurparab.[39] Along with the pilgrims were 1300 Akali workers led by Jathedar Nachattar Singh who had come to participate in the Dharam Yudh Morcha and to court arrest.[100][40] The Akali jathas who were also present consisted of about 200 women, 18 children and about 1100 men and were also forced to stay inside the temple complex.[96][40] Those who were inside were not allowed to go out after 10:00 PM on 3 June because of the curfew placed by the military.[96]

In addition, as of 3 June the pilgrims who had entered the temple in the days prior were unaware that Punjab had been placed under curfew.[100] Thousands of pilgrims and hundreds of Akali workers had been allowed to collect inside the Temple complex without any warning either of the sudden curfew or imminent Army attack.[100]

In the night the curfew was re-imposed with the army and para-military patrolling all of Punjab. The army sealed off all routes of ingress and exit around the temple complex.[101]

Army units led by Indian Army Lt. Gen Kuldip Singh Brar surrounded the temple complex on 3 June 1984.

Just before the commencement of the operation, K.S. Brar addressed the soldiers:

The action is not against the Sikhs or the Sikh religion; it is against terrorism. If there is anyone amongst them, who have strong religious sentiments or other reservations, and do not wish to take part in the operation he can opt out, and it will not be held against him.

— Kuldip Singh Brar, [102]

However, no one opted out and that included many "Sikh officers, junior commissioned officers and other ranks".[102]

4 June

Akal Takhat, Amritsar

On 4 and 5 June, messages asking pilgrims to leave the temple were played over loudspeakers.[76] However, in 2017 the Amritsar District and Sessions Judge Gurbir Singh gave a ruling which stated that there was no evidence that the Indian army provided warnings for pilgrims to leave the temple complex before commencing their assault.[36] Judge Gurbir Singh wrote in his ruling, "There is no evidence that army made any announcements asking ordinary civilians to leave Golden Temple complex before launching the operation in 1984...There is no written record of any public announcement by the civil authorities requesting the people to come out of the complex. No log of vehicle used for making such announcements is there...The event underlines the human rights violations by troops during the operation.[36][103] The lack of evidence of any warning to vacate the temple complex was the basis of a compensatory award given to Sikhs who had been illegally detained by the Indian military.[36] The army began bombarding the historic Ramgarhia Bunga, the water tank, and other fortified positions with Ordnance QF 25-pounder artillery. After destroying the outer defences laid by Shabeg Singh, the army moved tanks and APCs onto the road separating the Guru Nanak Niwas building.[104]

The army helicopters spotted the massive movements, and General K. Sunderji sent tanks and APCs to meet them.[105]

The artillery and small arms firing stopped for a while and Gurcharan Singh Tohra, former head of SGPC, was sent to negotiate with Bhindranwale for his surrender. He was, however, unsuccessful and the firing resumed.

The accounts of survivors inside of the temple complex were consistent with the military commencing its assault in the early morning of June 4.[100] Duggal states that the army attack started at

4:00 AM with a 25-pounder that fell in the ramparts of the Deori to the left of the Akal Takht Sahib.[100] Duggal further states that during the assault he saw a number of dead bodies of children and women in the Parikrama.[100] The army's assault had prevented Duggal from leaving the room in which he had taken shelter as he believed it would have resulted in his death.[100] Another eyewitness, Bhan Singh the Secretary of the SGPC, states that the army provided no warning of the start of the attack which prevented pilgrims and those who came as a part of the Dharam Yudh Morcha from exiting.[106] A female survivor recalled that it was not until the army began using explosives on the temple that they were aware that it had commenced its assault.[106] She further stated that within the Harmandir Sahib, there were some garanthis (priests), ragis (singers), sevadars (employees) and yatris (pilgrims) but no armed terrorists.[106] Prithpal Singh, the sevaradar on duty at the Akal rest house which housed pilgrims, stated that it was shelled by the military.[106] As of May 1985 during the recording of Prithpal's account, the Akal Rest house still bore the bullet marks caused by the Indian Army.[107]

5 June

On 5 June the blind head Ragi of the Harmandir Sahib Amrik Singh and Ragi Avtar Singh, were struck by bullets inside of the Harmandir Sahib by the Indian army.[108] The army's targeting of the Harmandir Sahib with bullets was in contrast to the alleged restraint stated in the army issued White Paper on 10 July 1984.[108] As of 5 June pilgrims who had reached the temple on 3 June were still present hiding in rooms.[109] In one room 40-50 persons were huddled together including a six-month-old child during the army's assault.[109] A female survivor of the assault stated that the army asked people to leave their hiding spots and guaranteed safe passage and water; she recalled seeing the dead bodies of pilgrims who answered the announcements lying in the Parikrama the next morning.[109]

In the morning, shelling started on the building inside the Harmandir Sahib complex.[110] The 9th division launched a frontal attack on the Akal Takht, although it was unable to secure the building. The Golden Temple complex had honeycombed tunnel structures.[111]

19:00 hrs

The BSF and CRPF attacked Hotel Temple View and Brahm Boota Akhara, respectively, on the southwest fringes of the complex. By 22:00 hours both the structures were under their control.[112] The army simultaneously attacked various other gurdwaras. Sources mention either 42 or 74 locations.[104]

22:00–07:30 hrs

Late in the evening, the generals decided to launch a simultaneous attack from three sides. Ten Guards, 1 Para Commandos and Special Frontier Force (SFF) would attack from the main entrance of the complex, and 26 Madras and 9 Kumaon battalions from the hostel complex side entrance from the south. The objective of the 10 Guards was to secure the northern wing of the Temple complex and draw attention away from SFF who were to secure the western wing of the complex and 1 Para Commandos who were to gain a foothold in Akal Takht and in Harmandir Sahab, with the help of divers. Twenty-six Madras was tasked with securing the southern and the eastern complexes, and the 9 Kumaon regiment with SGPC building and Guru Ramdas Serai. Twelve Bihar was charged with providing a cordon and fire support to the other regiments by neutralising enemy positions under their observance.[113]

An initial attempt by the commandos to gain a foothold at Darshani Deori failed as they came under devastating fire, after which several further attempts were made with varying degrees of success. Eventually, other teams managed to reach Darshani Deori, a building north of the Nishan Sahib, and started to fire at the Akal Takht and a red building towards its left, so that the SFF troops could get closer to the Darshani Deori and fire gas canisters at Akal Takht. The canisters bounced off the building and affected the troops instead.

Meanwhile, 26 Madras and 9 Garhwal Rifles (reserve troops) had come under heavy fire from the Langar rooftop, Guru Ramdas Serai and the buildings in the vicinity. Moreover, they took a lot of time in forcing open the heavy Southern Gate, which had to be shot open with tank fire. This delay caused a lot of casualties among the Indian troops fighting inside the complex. Three tanks and an APC had entered the complex.

Crawling was impossible as Shabeg Singh had placed light machine guns nine or ten inches above the ground. The attempt caused many casualties among the Indian troops. A third attempt to gain the Pool was made by a squad of 200 commandos. On the southern side, the Madras and Garhwal battalions were not able to make it to the pavement around the pool because they were engaged by positions on the southern side.

Despite the mounting casualties, General Sunderji ordered a fourth assault by the commandos. This time, the Madras battalion was reinforced with two more companies of the 7th Garhwal Rifles under the command of General Kuldeep Singh Brar. However, the Madras and Garhwal troops under Brigadier A. K.

Dewan once again failed to move towards the parikarma (the pavement around the pool).

Brigadier Dewan reported heavy casualties and requested more reinforcements. General Brar sent two companies of 15 Kumaon Regiment. This resulted in yet more heavy casualties, forcing Brigadier Dewan to request tank support. As one APC inched closer to the Akal Takht it was hit with an anti-tank RPG, which immediately immobilized it. Brar also requested tank support. The tanks received the clearance to fire their main guns (105 mm high-explosive squash head shells) only at around 7:30 a.m.[114]

6 June

The army used seven Vijayanta Tanks during the operation[115]

Vijayanta tanks shelled the Akal Takht. It suffered some damage but the structure was still standing.[111] The Special Group, a confidential special forces unit of the R&AW, began its planned raid on this day.[116]

7 June

The army entered the Akal Takht. Dead bodies of Bhindranwale, Shabeg Singh and Amrik Singh were discovered in the building.[111] The army gained effective control of the Harmandir Sahib complex.[citation needed]

8–10 June

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The army fought about four Sikhs holed up in basement of a tower. A colonel of the commandos was shot dead by an LMG burst while trying to force his way into the basement. By the afternoon of 10 June, the operation was over.[citation needed]

Conclusion

President Zail Singh visited the temple premises after the operation, while making the round, he was shot at by a sniper from one of the buildings that the army had not yet cleared. The bullet hit the arm of an army colonel accompanying the president.[122] The operation also led to the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 31 October 1984 by two of her Sikh bodyguards as an act of vengeance,[123][124] triggering the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. The widespread killing of Sikhs, principally in the national capital Delhi but also in other major cities in North India, led to major divisions between

the Sikh community and the Indian Government. The army withdrew from Harmandir Sahib later in 1984 under pressure from Sikh demands.[125] The 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182 is thought to have been a revenge action.

General Arun Shridhar Vaidya, the Chief of Army Staff at the time of Operation Blue Star, was assassinated in 1986 in Pune by two Sikhs, Harjinder Singh Jinda and Sukhdev Singh Sukha. Both were sentenced to death, and hanged on 7 October 1992.

In March 1986, Sikh militants again occupied and continued to use the temple compound which necessitated another police action known as Operation Black Thunder on 1 May 1986, Indian paramilitary police entered the temple and arrested 200 militants that had occupied Harmandir Sahib for more than three months.[126] On 2 May 1986 the paramilitary police undertook a 12-hour operation to take control of Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar from several hundred militants, but almost all the major radical leaders managed to escape.[127] In June 1990, the Indian government ordered the area surrounding the temple to be vacated by local residents in order to prevent militants activity around the temple.[128]

Mutinies by Sikh soldiers

As the aftermath of the Operation Blue Star, cases of mutinies by Sikh soldiers, mostly raw recruits, were reported from different places. On 7 June, six hundred soldiers of the 9th Battalion of the Sikh Regiment, almost the entire other ranks' strength, mutinied in Sri Ganganagar. While some managed to escape to Pakistan, most were rounded up by men of Rajputana Rifles. The largest mutiny took place in Sikh Regimental Centre at Ramgarh in Bihar where recruits for the Sikh Regiment are trained. There, 1,461 soldiers—1,050 of them raw recruits, stormed the armoury, killing one officer and injuring two before they set out for Amritsar. The leaders of the mutiny divided the troops into two groups just outside of Banaras to avoid a rumoured roadblock. One half was engaged by army artillery at Shakteshgarh railway station; those who managed to escape were rounded up by 21st Mechanised Infantry Regiment. The other half engaged with the artillery and troops of 20th Infantry Brigade, during which 35 soldiers (both sides) were killed.[129][130][131] There were five more smaller mutinies in different parts of India. In total 55 mutineers were killed and 2,606 were captured alive.[132][130]

The captured mutineers were court-martialed, despite efforts by various groups including retired Sikh officers to get them reinstated.[133] In August 1985, 900 of the 2,606 mutineers were rehabilitated by the

Central government as part of the Rajiv-Longowal accord.[130]

Long term effects

The long-term results of the operation included: Intended to end the insurgency, the operation, had the opposite effect, with attacks escalating.[51] There was more violence in Punjab after Operation Blue Star than prior. Official estimates of civilians, police, and terrorists killed increased from 27 in 1981, 22 in 1982, and 99 in 1983 to more than one thousand per year from 1987 to 1992.[134]

Outraging Sikhs all over India, with most finding it unacceptable that the armed forces had desecrated the Golden Temple, thousands of young men would join the Khalistan movement,[37] with "organized insurgency not taking root in Punjab until after the operation." [135] Sikhs became outraged with the military action in the bastion of Sikhi that provoked a wave of deep anguish and long-term resentment.[136]

The operation inflamed tensions in Punjab, though independence would only be declared by a Sarbat Khalsa in 1986, as 500,000 deployed Indian troops operated violently in Punjab, causing an estimated 250,000 Sikh deaths between 1984 and 1992.[137]

Criticisms

The operation has been criticised on several grounds including: the government's choice of timing for the attack, the heavy casualties, the loss of property, and allegations of human rights violations.

Timing

Operation Blue Star was planned on a Sikh religious day—the martyrdom day of Guru Arjan Dev, the founder of the Harmandir Sahib. Sikhs from all over the world visit the temple on this day. Many Sikhs view the timing and attack by the army as an attempt to inflict maximum casualties on Sikhs and demoralise them,[138] and the government is in turn blamed for the inflated number of civilian casualties by choosing to attack on that day. Additionally, Longowal had announced a statewide civil disobedience movement that would launch on 3 June 1984. Participants planned to block the flow of grain out of Punjab and refuse to pay land revenue, water and electricity bills.[139][140]

When asked about why the army entered the temple premises just after Guru Arjan Dev's martyrdom day (when the number of devotees is much higher), General Brar said that it was just a coincidence and that while he could not "comment on the inside of politics," he "assume[d] that after taking everything into consideration, the prime minister and the government decided this was the only course of action left," with "perhaps" the army having only had

three to four days to complete the operation. Based on "some sort of information," Bhindranwale was planning to declare Khalistan an independent country any moment with "a strong possibility" of support from Pakistan, and "Khalistani currency had already been distributed." This declaration "might" have increased chances of "large sections" of Punjab Police and security personnel siding with Bhindranwale; as "if there could be desertions in the army, then the police, who were in Punjab, who were privy to Bhindranwale's speeches, might have [also deserted]," as "they were also emotionally charged by what was happening." [141] The army waited for the surrender of militants on the night of 5 June but the surrender did not happen. The operation had to be completed before dawn. Otherwise, exaggerated messages of army besieging the temple would have attracted mobs from nearby villages to the temple premises. The army could not have fired upon these civilians. More importantly, Pakistan would have come in the picture, declaring its support for Khalistan.[35] He described the operation as traumatic and painful, but necessary.[142]

Media censorship

Before the attack by the army, a media blackout was imposed in Punjab.[143] The Times reporter Michael Hamlyn reported that journalists were picked up from their hotels at 5 a.m. in a military bus, taken to the adjoining border of the state of Haryana and "were abandoned there." [143] The main towns in Punjab were put under curfew, transportation was banned, a news blackout was imposed, and Punjab was "cut off from the outside world." [144] A group of journalists who later tried to drive into Punjab were stopped at the road block at Punjab border and were threatened with being shot if they proceeded.[143] Indian nationals who worked with the foreign media also were banned from the area.[143] The press criticized these actions by government as an "obvious attempt to attack the temple without the eyes of the foreign press on them." [145] The media blackout throughout Punjab resulted in spread of rumours. The only available source of information during the period was All India Radio and the Doordarshan channel.[146]

Human rights Sikh militants

The government issued White Paper alleged that on June 6, a group of some 350 people, including Longowal and Tohra surrendered to the army near the Guru Nanak Niwas.[147] The White Paper further alleged that to prevent the surrender, the militants opened fire and threw grenades at the group resulting in the deaths of 70 people, including 30 women and 5 children.[147] However, neither Bhan Singh nor

Longowal during their recounting of the events that took place on June 6 made any reference to either surrendering to the military or an attack on civilians by the militants.[147]

The government issued White Paper alleged that on 8 June 1984, an unarmed army doctor was abducted by the militants and was hacked to death.[147] However, Giani Puran Singh who was called by the military to act as a mediator to facilitate the surrender of four militants in the basement of the Bunga Jassa Singh Ramgharia, stated that the "so called doctor" had been killed along with two other army personnel when they ventured close to the militant's hiding place.[147]

Indian army

Former Indian Service Officer Ramesh Inder Singh,[148] the then Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Amritsar in one of his interview with BBC said that even the Governor of (Indian) Punjab did not know that there would be military action and he indicated that the Operation was badly carried out and panic among foot soldiers was so evident that they were formalizing their plans on the bonnets of their vehicles.

Brahma Chellaney, the Associated Press's South Asia correspondent, was the only foreign reporter who managed to stay on in Amritsar despite the media blackout.[149] His dispatches, filed by telex, provided the first non-governmental news reports on the bloody operation in Amritsar. His first dispatch, front-paged by The New York Times, The Times of London and The Guardian, reported a death toll about twice of what authorities had admitted. According to the dispatch, about 780 militants and civilians and 400 troops had perished in fierce gun-battles.[150] Chellaney reported that about "eight to ten" men suspected Sikh militants had been shot with their hands tied. In that dispatch, Mr. Chellaney interviewed a doctor who said he had been picked up by the army and forced to conduct postmortems despite the fact he had never done any postmortem examination before.[151] In reaction to the dispatch, the Indian government charged Chellaney with violating Punjab press censorship, two counts of fanning sectarian hatred and trouble, and later with sedition,[152] calling his report baseless and disputing his casualty figures.[153] The Supreme Court of India ordered Chellaney to cooperate with Amritsar police, who interrogated him concerning his report and sources. Chellaney declined to reveal his source, citing journalistic ethics and the constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press. In September 1985 charges against Chellaney were dropped.[152] The Associated Press stood by the accuracy of the reports

and figures, which were "supported by Indian and other press accounts".[154]

Similar accusations of highhandedness by the army and allegations of human rights violations by security forces in Operation Blue Star and subsequent military operations in Punjab have been leveled by Justice V. M. Tarkunde,[155] Mary Anne Weaver,[156] human rights lawyer Ram Narayan Kumar,[157] and anthropologists Cynthia Mahmood and Joyce Pettigrew.[158][159][160]

In April 2017 Justice Gurbir Singh stated that the army's failure to provide any announcement to pilgrims before commencing Operation Bluestar was a human rights violation.[36]

The Indian army mistreated pilgrims who were detained immediately after the fighting stopped on June 6 by failing to provide them any water. Some pilgrims were reduced to collecting drinking water from the canals that contained dead bodies and were filled with blood.[161]

Ragi Harcharan Singh stated that on June 6 the Indian army gave its first announcement for evacuation since the commencement of Operation Bluestar. Singh states that he witnessed hundreds of pilgrims, including women, being shot at by the army as they emerged from hiding.[41]

A female survivor witnessed Indian soldiers line up Sikh men in a que, tie their arms behind their backs with their turbans, beat them with rifle butts until they bled and then executed by being shot.[162]

Giana Puran Singh stated he along with 3-4 others were used as human shields for the protection of an officer who wanted to inspect the inside of the Darbar Sahib for anyone using a machine gun.[163]

A member of the AISSF stated that on June 6 those who surrendered before the army were made to lie down on the hot road, interrogated, made to move on their knees, bit with rifle butts and kicked with boots on private parts and their heads. The detainees were made to have their arms tied behind their backs with their own turbans and denied water. At about 7:00 PM the detainees were made to sit on the Parikrama near the army tanks. Many were injured as there was still firing from the side of the Akal Takht.[163]

Post-mortem reports showed that most of the dead bodies had their hands tied behind their backs, implying they had died after the army assault and not during. These bodies were in a putrid state at the time of post-mortem as they had been exposed in the open for 72 hours before being brought in.[42]

The Indian Army responded to this criticism by stating that they "answered the call of duty as disciplined, loyal and dedicated members of the Armed Forces of India. ... our loyalties are to the nation, the armed forces to which we belong, the uniforms we wear and to the troops we command".[164]

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