

Report from New Delhi by Susan Maitra

The mustard plant syndrome in Punjab

Whether the government can exorcize the evil spirit running amok in this key border state remains to be seen.

In some parts of India when the village medicine man is called upon to cure possessed individuals, he brings along a mustard plant with which he flays the afflicted patient to drive out the "evil spirits." Whenever such treatment fails to bring results, it is generally agreed that this is because the "evil spirits" reside in the mustard plant itself.

The evil spirits that have settled within Punjab over the past years continue to defy every effort to halt the bloodletting and bind the wounds of this strife-torn state.

In the most recent days, New Delhi has launched a new effort at negotiation with the mainstream leadership of the Akali Dal, the Sikh political party, in an apparent effort to wean party leader Sant Longowal and his associates from the grip of the fanatic fundamentalist Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Bhindranwale and his gang of terrorists, who carry the separatists' banner for "Khalistan," have insinuated themselves into the Akali movement over the past two years to the point that they are now dictating terms to the traditional Akali leadership, and to everyone else. Both the Akali Dal leadership and the Bhindranwale group have been in an uneasy alliance inside the Golden Temple, one of the most important Sikh shrines, in Amritsar for more than a year. Bhindranwale controls one portion of the huge Golden Temple fortress, while Longowal is reportedly ensconced on the top floor in a room he has not left for weeks.

The occasion for Delhi's renewed bid to isolate the terrorists is the sharp polarization between the two Sikh camps that burst forth following the murder on April 14 of one Surinder Singh Sodhi, a close associate and top hit man for Bhindranwale. Sodhi's female assailant reportedly went directly to Bhindranwale following the murder, where she tape-recorded a confession that she had been paid Rs. 200,000 (about \$20,000) by the leadership of the Akali Dal to kill Bhindranwale and his top leadership.

The following day her dead body was found in a sack in a ditch, but the story of her confession had already raised the temperature in the Golden Temple to the boiling point. Longowal expressed fear for his life in the same breath as he categorically denied any involvement in the killing.

The next day a new wave of terror was unleashed. In a coordinated action small bands of terrorists attacked and set fire to 37 railway stations throughout Punjab, and the so-called Dashmesh Regiment, a terrorist sub-unit of the banned All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF) front, warned of "bigger actions to follow." On April 16 three Akali supporters were killed by followers of Bhindranwale.

There are several features of the recent violence that are significant. First, members of the local Punjab police force have fired upon the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) sent into the state under the provision of presidential rule to combat the terrorist out-

breaks, and a number of Punjab police officers have been arrested for involvement in the terrorism.

Second, official reports are that common criminals are being used by Bhindranwale and the AISSF leaders to conduct the terror. Also, a story in the press that the Khalistan protagonists were negotiating with an international "hit team" offering a contract to eliminate certain Indian officials is under investigation, according to Home Minister P. C. Sethi.

Third, it is apparent that the terror operation is of the "low-intensity" variety—it is constant and thus corrosive, but carefully kept below the threshold that would generate an overwhelming popular demand for full military action.

At this writing, there is no official confirmation that any new offer has been made to the Akalis. In any case, the April 27 meeting in the Golden Temple of the entire Akali leadership will tell how much room—if any—Sant Longowal has to entertain such offers in the first place.

In many ways, Longowal gives every impression of being more of a captive of the Bhindranwale forces than ever before. He has vehemently denied the press reports that he and his associates are talking with New Delhi, and in the most recent days he has contradicted his earlier concern and now asserts that he is under no physical threat within the Golden Temple compound. He has also demanded the withdrawal of the CRPF from the state.

The April 27 meeting itself was apparently prompted by an open challenge to the Longowal group's leadership of the Akali cause by the Bhindranwale-AISSF gang in the wake of the Sodhi killing. Bhindranwale has rejected outright the report of the commission of prominent Akalis formed by Longowal to probe the charges of Akali connivance in the affair.