

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### New initiative in Punjab

*In the midst of escalating terrorist violence, the government gives a political solution another try.*

On March 4, the date of an important spring festival in India, the government took the first of a series of steps in a new effort to find a political solution to the strife that has ravaged the state of Punjab for the past six years. The release of 5 Sikh high priests and 40 detainees from the central prison was described by Punjab Gov. S.S. Ray as "part one" of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's plan for a settlement of the Punjab problem.

Moreover, there would be more prison releases, Ray said, a reference to the 400-odd individuals—alleged militants and terrorists—who have been held without bail or charges for as much as four years. Their release or trial has become a *cause célèbre* of a majority among Sikhs and others, who view it as a necessary proof of the government's "good faith" vis-à-vis the Sikh community.

Days later, it was announced that the Punjab State Assembly, moribund in any case under the conditions of President's Rule imposed on the state a year ago when the Barnala government became paralyzed by terrorist violence, was officially dissolved. Apart from Governor Ray's claim that the legislators had been interfering in the administration of the state, no explanation has been given as the reason for this move, but it is assumed to be clearing the way for fresh elections and a new government in the state.

The steps come as violence and terrorist murder continues at a heady pace. By one estimate, terrorists have claimed at least 381 lives in Punjab,

including leaders of all the various political parties, since the beginning of the year. Even as the 5 priests and 40 detainees were being flown to Amritsar, terrorists gunned down 36 and wounded another 40 at a religious gathering in a Punjab village.

But Governor Ray insisted that the prime minister's plan had just begun and would not be derailed by anything the terrorists did. Whenever a good step was proposed, he said, the terrorists indulged in an orgy of violence to try to check the government's hand. Ray established his credentials as a no-nonsense individual during the early 1970s in the state of West Bengal, where he is credited with stopping the Naxalite movement in its tracks. He has been running Punjab since the latest attempt at a political solution failed and President's Rule was imposed. The Akali Dal government headed by moderate faction leader S.S. Barnala had been elected in September 1985 following the accord between Rajiv Gandhi and the late Sant Longowal.

Governor Ray is known to have been upset with the central government's inability to come forth with a new political initiative last fall. At that time, Ray and his chief collaborator in tackling the Punjab problem, Punjab Police Chief Ribeiro, pointed to the lull in terrorist activity and argued that fresh political initiatives were timely and essential to win back momentum from the extremists. But inertia prevailed in Delhi, and the government maintained that political steps would

only be taken when the violence ceased.

Whatever other calculations were involved, it is likely that Police Chief Ribeiro's recent announcement that he will definitely retire at the end of May gave New Delhi a shove. The former police chief of Bombay, Ribeiro has a reputation for competence that recommended him to the Punjab position at a difficult hour, when it was finally acknowledged that the law enforcement apparatus in the state had been fatally compromised by the extremists. Ribeiro worked to rebuild the force and establish an anti-terrorist intelligence operation.

In one sense, the government's hesitation has been understandable. The dramatic move of July 1985, when Rajiv Gandhi signed the accord with Sant Longowal that led to reestablishing an elected government in the state, was stillborn. Longowal's assassination within weeks of the accord opened a new round of terrorist violence and political polarization which in turn helped chill the government's resolve to fulfill the rest of the terms of the accord—release of detainees, rehabilitation of those who deserted the Army following the 1984 Operation Bluestar, and action against instigators of the anti-Sikh riots that followed Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assassination in October 1984. The Longowal-Barnala faction could not stem the tide, and new violence filled the resulting vacuum.

The present initiative appears to rest on the ability of the more militant elements among the Sikh priests and the breakaway United Akali Dal (UAD) led by Prakash Singh Badal (that is, those who broke with Sant Longowal over the 1985 accord) to unite the fragmented Akali majority convincingly enough to take the wind out of extremist sails and reestablish a political mainstream in the state.