

There's a time for fighting Sikh guru said 300 years ago

NEW DELHI (Reuter) — "When all avenues have been explored, all means tried, it is rightful to draw the sword out of the scabbard and wield it," wrote Gobind Singh, the last of the Sikh gurus some 300 years ago.

He organized a militant group called "Khalsa," meaning "pure" in Persian, to fight Mughal persecution. Since then a small group of extremist Sikhs have dreamed of forming their own separate Khalistan state.

Founded in the 15th century by the first guru Nanak, the Sikhs were peaceful people until their transformation into a martial race by Gobind Singh.

The sectarian violence that has seen the deaths of about 400 people during the past six months in the Punjab, the northern Indian state where the Sikhs are campaigning for greater religious concessions and political autonomy, are only the latest examples of their militancy.

The Sikhs comprise only about 2 per cent of India's 700 million population but their influence in the army, in commerce and in agriculture is deeply felt.

They said Prime Minister Indira Gandhi could not afford concessions that might be seen by her majority Hindu constituents as a retreat. Neither could the leadership of the main Sikh political party Akali Dal — under pressure from more extremist elements — tone down its demands.

Akali Dal president Harchand Singh Longowal, said to be a moderate, launched what he called his Dharam Yudh (holy war) in August, 1982, to save Punjab and the Sikhs from what

he called the "unholy designs of the Delhi trading rulers."

His demands include control of all historic Sikh temples in India, the incorporation into Punjab of Punjabi-speaking villages in neighboring states and the integration of the separately-administered Punjab capital of Chandigarh into the state.

But supporters of hardline preacher Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who set up his headquarters at the Golden Temple at Amritsar the Sikhs' holiest shrine, say the Akali Dal demands are too weak.

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