



World Sikh Council – America Region

A Representative Body of Sikh Institutions of America Working under the Patronage of Siri Akal Takhat Sahib

P.O. Box 3635, Columbus, Ohio 43210, USA

Phone: 614-210-0591, 419-902-0950, Fax: 419-535-6794

E-mail: wscamerica@nahal.com, Website: www.worldsikhcouncil.org

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Contact: Dr. Tarunjit Singh Butalia, Secretary General,
World Sikh Council – America Region, 614-395-9830,
butalia.1@osu.edu

Member Gurdwaras:

1. Gurdwara Sahib Fremont, Fremont, CA
2. Guru Nanak Sikh Mission, Livingston, CA
3. Sikh Gurdwara of LA, North Hollywood, CA
4. Sikh Gurdwara Riverside, Riverside, CA
5. Colorado Singh Sabha, Denver, CO
6. Guru Singh Sabha of Augusta, Augusta, GA
7. Sikh Study Circle of Atlanta, Atlanta, GA
8. Sikh Religious Society of Chicago, Palatine, IL
9. Sikh Society of South, New Orleans, LA
10. Sikh Gurdwara of Michigan, Rochester Hills, MI
11. Sikh Society of Michigan, Madison Heights, MI
12. Sikh Gurdwara of North Carolina, Durham, NC
13. Garden State Sikh Association, Pluckemin, NJ
14. Siri Guru Singh Sabha, Glenrock, NJ
15. Sikh Cultural Society Inc., Richmond Hills, NY
16. Sikh Cultural & Edu. Soc. of Western NY, Buffalo, NY
17. Sikh Religious Society of Dayton, Dayton, OH
18. Guru Nanak Found. of Greater Cleveland, OH
19. Guru Gobind Singh Sikh Society, Bedford, OH
20. Guru Nanak Rel. Soc. of Central Ohio, Columbus, OH
21. Tristate Sikh Cultural Society, Monroeville, PA
22. Mid South Sikh Sabha, Memphis, TN
23. Sikh Center of Gulf Coast, Houston, TX
24. Siri Guru Singh Sabha, Richardson, TX
25. Sikh Gurdwara of North Texas, Garland, TX
26. Singh Sabha Gurdwara, Fairfax, VA
27. Sikh Association of Central Virginia, VA
28. Sikh Religious Society of Wisconsin, Brookfield, WI

Other Sikh Institution Members:

1. Siri Guru Granth Sahib Found., Anaheim, CA
2. Sikhs Serving America, Topeka, KS
3. Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force, MD
4. Sikh Youth Federation of N. America, White Plains, NY
5. Sikh Coalition, New York, NY
6. Sikh Educational & Religious Foundation, Dublin, OH
7. Sikh Youth Federation of USA, Toledo, OH
8. Academy of Guru Granth Studies, Arlington, TX

World Sikh Council – America Region Leads Worldwide Sikh Delegation to French Government, Presents Memorandum in Paris

The Chairperson of World Sikh Council – America Region, Mr. Kuldeep Singh, led a worldwide Sikh delegation to meet with the French government in Paris on February 2 and 4, 2004, and presented a memorandum to the French government on behalf of 25 million Sikhs worldwide.

In response to France's proposal set to vote on Tuesday, February 10, 2004 for prohibiting "the wearing of signs or clothes which conspicuously display a pupil's religious affiliation" in government schools, the memorandum submitted stressed that the Sikh Turban is not a symbol but a vital and mandatory part of the Sikh identity.

Recalling the sacrifices made by Sikhs in World I and II in France, the memorandum presented by Mr. Kuldeep Singh proclaimed "It is not only sad but ironical and extremely painful that the community which fought for the freedom of France wearing their Turbans, now has to fight for the freedom to wear the Turban in France."

The delegation consisted of representatives of World Sikh Council – America Region, Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (Amritsar, India), United Sikh Organization, French, and European Sikh representatives.

A number of Sikh representatives from across the world had called upon the World Sikh Council – America Region’s Chairman, Mr. Kuldeep Singh, to lead the delegation.

The memorandum was presented to two senior French Government officials that met with the Sikh delegation: Mr. Rene Roudaut, Conseiller pour les Affaires religieuses, Ministere des Affaires Etrangeres, February 2, 2004; and Mr. Rolland Jouve, Conseiller au cabinet du Ministere delegue a l’enseignement scolaire, February 4, 2004. A copy of the memorandum is attached.

At the Sikh delegation meeting with Mr. Rene Roudaut on February 2, 2004 in Paris, Mr. Roudaut told the delegation that Sikhs across the world have stated clearly that the Turban is mandatory. He further added that the representations received from Sikhs stating that the Sikh Turban is not a symbol but a vital part of the Sikh identity are being forwarded to French authorities.

Mr. Rolland Jouve received the delegation in Paris on February 4, 2004. He told the delegation that the French Education Minister will consult the French Sikh community to draw up specific guidelines to allow the wearing of the Sikh Turban and added that this consultation will take place after the law is passed next week. He added that these discussions will try to find an accommodation between religious and cultural practices and its compatibility in a school environment. He said that Sikhs students had been wearing a small turban in school in the past, and that had not been a problem. Mr. Jouve stressed that the proposed law lays down the principle that students of all religions should have equal rights in a school.

Mr. Jouve remarked “We are very happy with the Sikhs in France. There is no problem of integration with Sikhs in France. We want the Sikhs to remain in France. We are aware that Turbaned Sikhs fought for France in the World Wars.”

Mr. Jouve further elaborated that the proposed law was not against religion and that the problem was not with the Kippah, Hijab, Cross, or the Sikh Turban. In his perspective, the problem was how students interact in a classroom.

Mr. Kuldeep Singh communicated to the French officials, "To a Sikh, unshorn hair and turban are mandatory but not every turban wearing person is a Sikh. Unshorn hair, and by extension the Turban, is not a symbol or an article of clothing as it does not symbolize: it is part of being a Sikh.”

During the two meetings with French officials, United Sikh Organization delivered a petition, which was signed by thousands of Sikhs and non-Sikhs around the world. The petition made it clear that a Sikh’s Turban is mandatory and non-negotiable.

The meetings with French Government officials in Paris are a part of the World Sikh Council – America Region’s many efforts to assist the Sikh community of France (numbering about 10,000) in asserting and protecting their religious rights. Earlier on January 5, 2004, the World Sikh Council – America Region had written a letter to President Jacques Chirac outlining the Council’s concerns over the proposal to ban conspicuous religious symbols, including headdresses, from government schools in the name of separation of church and state. On January 14, 2004, a delegation of the Council had met with the French Ambassador to the US, Mr. Jean-David Levitte, in Columbus, Ohio and stressed that “wearing of a religious headdress for Sikhs is not an optional expression of faith but a mandated religious requirement.”

World Sikh Council – America Region is the only representative and elected body of Sikh Gurdwaras and institutions in the US. Its members include 28 Gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) and 8 other Sikh institutions across 17 US states.

World Sikh Council – America Region works to promote Sikh interests at the national and international level focusing on issues of advocacy, education, and well-being of humankind.

MEMORANDUM PRESENTED TO FRENCH GOVERNMENT

Memorandum presented to:

- *Mr. Rene Roudaut, Conseiller pour les Affaires religieuses, Ministere des Affaires Etrangeres, February 2, 2004*
- *Mr. Rolland Jouve, Conseiller au cabinet du Ministre delegue a l'enseignement scolaire, February 4, 2004*

In support of Sikhs in France and on behalf of the World Sikh Council-America Region, I along with members of my delegation comprising of Karamvir Singh, Bobigny, Iqbal Singh, La Courneuve, Malkit Singh, Le Bourget, Gurdial Singh, Bobigny, France, Hardayal Singh, New Jersey, United States, and Mejjindarpal Kaur, London, UK both of United Sikhs Organization, hereby present this Memorandum for your kind attention.

The Sikh Turban:

In December 2003, President Jacques Chirac endorsed a proposal, recommended by the Stasi commission, to prohibit schoolchildren from wearing religious symbols and clothing in French public schools. President Chirac made reference to the banning of the Muslim Hijab, Jewish Kippah and large Christian Crosses. Since then, a draft law has been revealed which will be tabled in the French parliament this week.

Will the proposed ban prevent a Sikh from wearing a Turban, which is an integral part of a Sikh's identity, at public schools and the workplace?

We submit that to ask Sikhs to remove their Turban would be asking them to perform an impossible act of removing their dignity for the reasons outlined below.

A Sikh is inseparable from his or her Turban, which has been worn for centuries to cover his/her unshorn hair. The Sikh faith promotes a follower's devotion to God. To a Sikh his/her unshorn hair and turban are mandatory but not every turban wearing person is a Sikh. Unshorn hair, and by extension the Turban, is not a symbol or an article of clothing as it does not symbolize: it is part of his/her being a Sikh.

The Sikh Turban is an outward commitment of the mission given to all Sikhs to fight for truth, stand up against tyranny, and protect the weak – and by so doing to uphold "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity".

The Sikh Faith:

The Sikh faith is monotheistic and propounds a life encompassing three virtues – earning an honest living, sharing what you earn, and worshipping the Supreme Creator. Today, the Sikh faith is the fifth largest faith group in the world and its people number 25 million around the world.

Past and Present:

Despite the fact that there are over 10,000 Sikhs residing in France, the Stasi commission failed to consult or take into account the consequences this proposal poses to the French-Sikh population. Therefore, the Sikh community in France was unable to put its case for wearing the Turban to the commission.

Historically, Sikhs have gallantly fought against oppression while wearing their Turbans. The Sikhs have a long and glorious relationship with France that dates back to the 19th century when military officers from Napoleon's armies assisted Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab in modernizing the Sikh army. Later, hundreds of thousands of Sikh soldiers fearlessly fought for French freedom during both World Wars, laying down their lives for the noble values that epitomize France's principles of "Liberty, Equality

and Fraternity".

While wearing the Turban, Sikh soldiers fought for the Allied Forces, including the United States, England and France, in World War I and II. More than 100,000 Sikhs died to protect the honour and integrity of people of all faiths. It is not only sad but ironical and extremely painful that the community which fought for the freedom of France wearing their Turbans, now has to fight for the freedom to wear the Turban in France.

Sikhs in France:

The Sikh community of France embraces the strong values of French culture and history. Their history resonates with the right to defend "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity". For Sikhs, their commitment to their faith is the very basis for loyalty towards a just nation/republic. There is no conflict of affairs between the two entities, faith and nation, which is prevalent as in the role played by the Sikhs in history especially in World War I and II. In fact, Sikhs have successfully integrated into French society and have adopted French culture as their own. The Sikhs consider France as their homeland and, if called upon, are ready to repeat their sacrifices for France. A power-point presentation entitled "Sikhs in French History" is enclosed for your kind information.

Furthermore, the ban on the Turban will affect Sikhs from other parts of the world, especially the European Community, who may wish to participate in student exchange or learning programmes.

We submit that by allowing the non-Sikhs French community to become familiar with the Turban at schools, integration will be promoted.

The Sikh community strongly feels that by not consulting the Sikh French population, the Stasi commission has failed to take into account the Sikh Value System and the deep significance of the Sikh Turban.

We are confident that had the Stasi commission investigated the case for the Sikh Turban, it would have come to the conclusion that the Sikh Turban is not a symbol or clothing which compromises the French ideal of secularity.

International Laws, Treaties and Resolutions:

We submit that if the proposed ban on religious dress includes the ban on wearing the Sikh Turban, it would be a violation of Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights - the right to manifest one's religion.

In our opinion, the secular nature of the French state can be secured by preventing the state itself from imposing or endorsing any religion. The proposed ban goes further and forces an individual to violate his or her own conscience. It seems to rest on a largely symbolic rationale, as a signal of the kind of society that France is. But it is precisely such symbolic statements that cannot be imposed on an individual by the state under the European Convention.

Although the issues are primarily ones that fall under Article 9, also of potential relevance are Article 8 (respect for private life, which includes dress); Article 10 (freedom of expression, which includes symbolic speech); and Article 14 (freedom from discrimination in the enjoyment of other Convention rights).

France as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is committed to encourage and respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the Right to Religion.

We also wish to highlight the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights (June, 1993), of which France was a signatory, which called for the comprehensive elimination of all forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Further, France is a signatory to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR). Under Para 67 of the WCAR report, France jointly declared: 'We recognize that members of certain groups with a distinct cultural identity face barriers

arising from a complex interplay of ethnic, religious and other factors, as well as their traditions and customs, and call upon States to ensure that measures, policies and programmes aimed at eradicating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance address the barriers that this interplay of factors creates'

Recommendations:

In order to seek an amicable solution, we would like to make the following proposals:

- Forward the representations in this Memorandum to the French President His Excellency Jacques Chirac, highlighting the concerns of the French-Sikh community to carefully review the position of the French Sikh Turban in his proposed legislation to promote secularity in public schools.
- Indicate the unique predicament of the Sikh community on how the Sikh Turban is a requirement of the faith and not simply an item of religious symbolism
- Request your assistance to secure an audience with French President Jacques Chirac, Education Minister and Interior Minister to explain the case of the French-Sikh community and how their basic human rights to Freedom of Expression and the Right to Education are being denied if France pushes this legislation further.

In conclusion, we thank you for taking the time to meet with us and to listen to our concerns. We wish for a positive resolution, fair to all affected faith groups and communities, in keeping with the French commitment to "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity".

As a world leader, France has shown leadership in upholding the rights of unheard voices. Implementing the proposed ban on religious expression would be a regressive step and it would be detrimental to its own citizens.

Kuldeep Singh

Chairperson, World Sikh Council - America Region, USA

and Representative of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee, Sri Amritsar Sahib, Punjab