

Sikh Official Declines Invitation to White House Event

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(RNS) A top official of a Sikh organization has declined an invitation to a White House event because he would not have been able to bring a kirpan, or small dagger traditionally worn by Sikhs, into the event.

Kuldeep Singh, chairman of the World Sikh Council -- American Region, chose not to attend the Wednesday (Aug. 18) event at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. The event marked the 400th anniversary of the formal placement of a Sikh holy book on Sept. 1, 1604 in a Sikh place of worship in the South Asian region of Punjab.

"While we appreciate the White House arranging this event to honor the Sikh community, we cannot compromise on the principles of our faith," said Tarunjit Singh, secretary-general of the World Sikh Council -- American Region, based in Columbus, Ohio. "The White House cannot honor our faith and at the same time deny us the practice of our faith."

Tarunjit Singh told Religion News Service he discussed the matter with the White House's Office of Public Liaison and was told that the kirpan would not be permitted due to security reasons.

"If they were to wear that at the security gate, they would be asked to remove it," he said in an interview.

The World Sikh Council issued a statement describing the kirpan as an article of Sikh faith that "formally initiated Sikhs" are required to wear. The council said the kirpan "is symbolic of the Sikh pledge to resist oppression and injustice but never to use weapons to attack anyone or to initiate a confrontation."

The Rev. Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, sent a letter to the council chairman, stating: "We stand in solidarity with you in the difficulties you experienced when the White House invited you to a ceremony celebrating this event and insisted that you arrive without the kirpan."

Rajwant Singh, national chairman of the Washington-based Sikh Council on Religion and Education and an organizer of the event, said he intended to wear a "very small" kirpan on a necklace to meet the White House requirements.

"You can't block yourself from dialogue at the same time you want to achieve goals," he said.

A White House spokesperson did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

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