

French Sikhs protest new law

France's tiny Sikh community is seeking help from Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to have their turbans exempted from a planned French law to ban Muslim headscarves and other religious symbols from schools.

Chain Singh, spokesman for about 5,000 Sikhs here, said he was contacting Vajpayee and Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh to ask them to urge Paris to exempt turbans.

"This law will not just be against Muslims. It will be against Sikhs as well," he said. "We cannot live without our turbans. This is our religion. If we cannot wear them, we may not be able to stay here."

Sikhs enjoy exemptions in other European countries, such as Britain dropping a requirement to wear a crash helmet when riding a motorcycle.

President Jacques Chirac had announced last month that France would soon pass a law banning noticeable religious symbols in public schools. Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders in France have criticised the law, which politicians say will reinforce the legal separation of church and state against Islamist activity here.

Singh said he had contacted the Indian embassy in Paris and would soon write to Vajpayee and Amarinder.

"India is responsible for Indians around the world. We want them to talk state-to-state with France," he said.

Sikhs might join Muslims in protesting against the planned law with a march in Paris on January 17, Singh said.

Mr Singh said Sikh men in France are often refused identity cards because they will not take off their turbans. Some schools have expelled Sikhs pupils for wearing turbans.

[Courtesy: *The Telegraph*]

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The Sikh 'Father Christmas'

And now, a Sikh Santa ! Meet Gursharan Singh Bhatia, a school-crossing guard at the Medina Road crossing, outside Glandal Primary School in Glen Waverley, Australia, who helps children cross the road safely all through the year. But for several school days before Christmas, he dons a Father Christmas dress. The Glendal kids, their parents and staff call him "Gooch", reported Sikhnet, an online Sikh community, quoting a report in *Herald Sun*. With a stop sign in one hand and a basket of lollies in the other, "Gooch" is a favourite of all. The Sikh Santa even gets a friendly wave from motorists.

[Courtesy: *Economic Times*]