

Sikh files \$60-million turban bias suit

K.P. Nayar writes from Washington: In October last, an American Sikh, who was twice barred from boarding domestic flights in New York, has filed a \$ 60-million civil rights suit alleging violation of US federal anti-discrimination statutes.

Tejindar Singh Kahlon, 65, was to take a South West Airlines flight from Long Island's MacArthur Airport on October 25 last year, when he was asked to step off the waiting line of passengers for a search of his turban.

Kahlon refused to comply with a demand from security staff at the airport that he should remove his turban for examination and told them that his religion forbade removing the turban in public. He, instead, asked airport security to probe his turban with a metal detector or by touch while it was still on his head.

Kahlon was not allowed to get on board the aircraft, but a manager for South West Airlines told him that he could catch a flight without having to remove his turban if returned the next day, according to Kahlon's attorney, Thomas Liotti.

However, when Kahlon returned the next day, the manager said airport security officials were still insisting that he had to remove his turban. The lawsuit says Kahlon was, therefore, unable to fly for the wedding of a friend's daughter.

The case, filed in the US district court in Central Islip, Long Island, accuses the town of Islip, which operates MacArthur airport, South West Airlines and the airport security firm, International Total Services, of discrimination and holds them liable for damages.

His attorney was quoted in Long Island newspapers as saying "I have known "Ted" Kahlon for 20 years. He is a first class gentleman, citizen attorney and judge, devout in his religious beliefs... It was flagrant denial of his civil rights, a humiliating and thoroughly embarrassing occurrence, for which he is entitled to substantial recompense".

Liotti claimed that Sikhs consider removing their turban in public as equal to going naked and quoted the US department of transportation as saying that requiring Kahlon to do so was a violation of federal anti-discrimination statutes.

Kahlon was born in Pakistani Punjab of pre-Partition India and has been a US citizen for three decades. He is himself an attorney and a hearing officer - equivalent to a judge - at the Nassau County family court in Long Island, New York.

Although there have been numerous allegations of discrimination against South Asians based on racial profiling at US airports since 9/11, this is the first known case of anyone of Indian origin filing for damages on that score.

