

UK Public bodies: To protect Sikhs, monitoring is essential

Early this year, a major conference took place at City Hall in central London organised by the Sikh Federation (UK) and hosted by the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. Around 100 Gurdwaras and Sikh organisations sent delegates with representatives from government departments, such as the Home Office, Cabinet Office, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and national agencies such as the Charity Commission, Passport Office and Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

The conference titled “Making Sikhs visible to Decision makers’ was addressed by the Mayor. He spoke about the background to the conference and the importance for decision makers to recognise the needs of the Sikh community who make a huge contribution not only in London, but throughout the UK. The purpose of the conference was to raise awareness within decision making bodies about the Sikh community and consider key issues and concerns faced by the community today.

Last year the Mayor met with Sikh representatives at a meeting organised by the Sikh Federation to discuss the need to organise the first ever conference to promote greater recognition and understanding of the Sikh identity. The Mayor committed to work with representatives from the Sikh community to encourage public bodies to recognise and monitor Sikhs as a separate and distinct ethnic minority for the purposes of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act. As a first and important step he agreed that the Greater London Authority (GLA), Transport for London (TfL) and the London Development Agency (LDA) would set an example and start to separately monitor Sikhs for not only employment purposes, but also as regards monitoring so there is fair provision of public services.

Sukhvinder Singh from the Sikh Federation (UK) provided some background to the day, highlighting some of the key issues to be covered and setting the scene for the remainder of the day. Ravinder Kaur from Young Sikhs (UK) then spoke of the enormous contribution of Sikhs reminding those present about the long Anglo-Sikh history, the importance of the Sikh identity, prominent British Sikh figures and the contribution of Sikhs to mankind. The first session was concluded by Detective Kolhi a representative from the Metropolitan Police Sikh Association (MPSA) and currently working in CID. He spoke about his experience as a visible Sikh working in the Met for the last 16 years and the role of the MPSA.

Dr. Harkirtan Singh-Raud, widely tipped to become the first visible Sikh to enter the UK Parliament began the next session on “Key issues facing Sikhs today”. He presented well researched evidence to show Sikhs were the largest and most visible ethnic minority. This left those present in no doubt that public bodies needed to start separately monitoring Sikhs as soon as possible.

Rob Marris MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for UK Sikhs made clear that there was overwhelming cross party support for Sikhs to be separately monitored and for the Sikh identity to be properly understood and safeguarded. Dominic Grieve MP, the Shadow Attorney General reminded decision makers from public bodies the legal justification for Sikhs to be separately recognised and monitored on the basis of the 1983 Mandla v Lee decision in the House of Lords.

The conference was chaired by Dabinderjit Singh who concluded by posing a series of simple questions to decision makers concerning Sikh numbers and provision of public services. He indicted if they were struggling to answer these questions it indicted public bodies were falling the Sikh community.

Bhai Amrik Singh, the Chair of the Sikh Federation (UK) said: We are delighted that the conference has given us an opportunity to explain to key decision makers why proper recognition and monitoring is vitally important, not only to the Sikh community but also to public bodies. A report setting out the key outcomes from the conference will be shared with national and local decision makers throughout the UK so we can push forward in gaining the recognition that we deserve.”

A Matter of Faith Sikh prisoner in USA allowed to keep his hair

A row over the cropping of a Sikh prisoner’s hair in the US came to an end after Florida Governor Jeb Bush permitted him to keep his hair in jail.

Satnam Singh, 45, was sentenced in 2003 at Fort Pierce, Florida, a three years of federal imprisonment on various charges. His federal imprisonment ended on Sunday and he is to be shifted to a minimum-security prison this week. The controversy broke out after the Florida correctional facility where he is to be shifted insisted on cutting his long hair according to Florida prison rules. Singh’s faith did not allow the hair to be cut. He had kept in intact while serving the three-year jail term.

The controversy reached such a head that media reports quoted his father as saying: Please cut off my son’s head instead of cutting his hair. Around 200 Sikh and non- Sikh groups worldwide carried out a sustained campaign to safeguard Singh’s religious rights. Muslims, Jews, Native Americans and Rastafarians, all of whose faiths do not allow cutting of hair, came out in support of Singh.

The US-based Sikh Coalition initiated the campaign. It took out a 35-page petition with over 6,800 signatures and submitted it to Gov. Bush, James McDonough, secretary of the state’s department of corrections, and Laura Bedard, deputy secretary of corrections, urging them to stop federal authorities from forcibly cutting Satnam Singh’s hair and removing his turban.

[Courtesy: *The Asian Age*]

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Punjab records heroin rush

The heroin reported to have been found in Rahul Mahajan’s blood might well have been routed through Punjab, police officilas in the state who are battling with a spurt in narcotics smuggling say.

“Heroin seizures have increased in the state during the last one year. Nearly 200 kg of the drug has been confiscated. The drug is taken to Delhi on train or by road and then dispatched to other parts of the country and even destinations abroad,” a police officer said.

A special narcotics cell was set up by the police in December last year to fight attempts by drug dealders based in Pakistan and Afghanistan to push drugs into India.

While the Narcotics control Bureau (NCB) has seized 125 kg of heroin, the BSF has caught 35 kg of heroin along the 564-km Pakistan border in Punjab since April 2005. The rest was seized by the police.

“We estimate that the seizure of heroin is less than 10 per cent of the total quantum that is being smuggled through this border as the Samba border in Jammu and Kashmir, the earlier route, has now been effectively sealed,” a senior BSF official said.

With consumption of heroin in the state thought to be negligible, the police and other security agencies are concerned about the growing perception of Punjab being a “safe state” among smugglers.

“Smuggling has been an old profession in Punjab. Earlier, it was liquor and gold. Smugglers turned to arms during the terrorism era. It is narcotics now,” an officer said.

According to sources in the NCB, heroin is being smuggled across the border in quantities of three to five kg or less, to make it easier to hide.

Once the contraband reaches Amritsar or Ferozepur, the consignment is sent to Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Chandigarh on way to Delhi, where it is collected, sold, disbursed to the other metros or sent abroad.

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Honour for Col. Grewal's daughter in USA

The Sikh Review is delighted to report that Mrs. Amardeep K. Kahlon, daughter of our member, Col. K.S. Grewal of Chandigarh, currently in Texas, USA, has been awarded the American National Award for Teaching Excellence. The award was presented to her in an international conference held last May. Our greetings to Ms. Kahlon who is a subscriber to this magazine [under a/c no. F06-027]. □