

## **Sikhs in Afghanistan confront fanatical Taliban!**

Reuters reports from Kabul: Around 100 angry Afghan Sikhs carried a coffin to the UN headquarters in Kabul, accusing Muslims of stopping them from cremating the dead man, last September.

Shouting slogans and punching their fists into the air the Sikh broke through hastily-assembled police barriers until they reached the gates of the UN mission. The protesters said Muslims had beaten them as they tried to bury community elder Lachman Singh.

“Aren’t we human? Hasn’t God created us as well? If God is only for Muslims, go ahead and kill us all, or hand us over to the UN.” Autaar Singh, Afghan Parliament’s sole Sikh representative, said. “We want our rights and freedom,” he said. “We weren’t stopped from performing our religious ceremonies even by the Taliban.”

Numbering several hundred in Kabul and a few dozen elsewhere. Afghanistan’s dwindling Sikh community complains of widespread discrimination from the overwhelming Muslim majority.

The head of criminal investigations at Kabul police, Ali Shah Paktiwal, came to calm the demonstrators and after brief talks with Sikh representatives inside the UN compound, agreed to escort the protesters to the site of the funeral. Most Sikhs, along with the country’s handful of Hindus, came during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1849) from India in the 19th century. But after more than 30 years of war in Afghanistan, most have fled.

In 2001, the Taliban ordered Sikhs, Hindus and other religious minorities to wear yellow patches, ostensibly so they would not be arrested by the religious police for breaking Taliban laws. The Sikhs said they had owned land in the Qalacha area of Kabul, in the shadow of the ancient Bala Hisar fortress, for more than 120 years. However, waves of Afghan refugees had built on the land and were now stopping them from performing religious rites, because the

Muslims regard the cremation of the dead as a sacrilege.

“We have owned his land for more than 120 years to perform our sacraments, but it is the first time were stopped and beaten by the people,” said Autaar Singh. “Even the Taliban did not oppress us as present regime.”

Having placed the coffin in the back of an estate car and squeezed into two buses, the Sikh protesters arrived at their gurdwara escorted by several dozen armed police.

A small crowd of Muslim men looked on warily as the Sikhs carried the coffin, draped in a silver cloth, inside the dharamsala compound where they built a funeral pyre. The body of the dead man was placed in the centre and set alight.

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