

## **Human and Civil Rights Groups speak up against Death Penalty.**

**New York, NY, Jan 19th 2006:** Human and civil rights organizations in New York joined their counterparts across the globe on Tuesday, to hold a candle light vigil calling on the Indian government to abolish the death penalty and to free its political prisoners.



Sikh community members from the tri-state area at the Candle Light Vigil on 17<sup>th</sup> Jan 2006

Members of the Sikh community, whose many political prisoners are languishing in Indian Jails, were joined by Amnesty International, Sikh Youth of America, Sikh Heritage Foundation, American Sikh Consultative Forum, members of tri-state Gurudwara's and Voices For Freedom to observe the candle light vigil on corner of 64th Street and 5th Avenue, around the corner from the Indian Consulate.

Nancy Hoffman, Amnesty International member of local group 9, NYC said, "Amnesty looks to work closely with the Sikh community on the issue of death penalty. We look forward to exploring human rights activism in India and in the world."



Nancy Hoffman of Amnesty International addressing the attendees

Braving the bitter cold dozens of people, including families, held candles and addressed the public. The brazen winter, acted as a reminder of the harsh reality and the human rights abuses suffered by prisoners of conscience.

"Around 124 countries, more than half the countries in the world, have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. On average, in the past decade more than three countries a year have abolished the death penalty for all crimes," said Mohinder Singh, chairman of Board of Trustees of Flushing Gurdwara, quoting an Amnesty International report. "The death penalty is a violation of human rights," he added,

Ranjit Singh, Director of Voices for Freedom, said, "A country, India, which describes itself as the largest democracy in the world ought to stand up for freedom of expression and right to self determination, which has been accepted as a human right. Prisoners of conscience in a country do not bode well for the human rights record in India."

Despite the cold and damp, the candles were beautiful, in sturdy glass jars, each one of them bearing a testimony to the voice of the oppressed.



Dr. Gurcharan Singh, Professor Emeritus of International Studies at Marymount Manhattan College and member of American Sikh Consultative Forum, said, "The Sikh religion is absolutely against torture -- physical emotional or mental -- on any grounds whatsoever. Despite international human rights standards, some nations still execute people. Around the world, the death penalty is used as a tool of political repression and a means to forever silence political opponents or eliminate politically "troublesome" individuals."

Jasvir Singh, President of Sikh Youth of America-New York Region, said, "The United Nations adopted without dissent the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Declaration proclaims the right of every individual to protection from deprivation of life. It states that no one shall be subjected to cruel or degrading punishment. The death penalty violates both of these fundamental rights. Davinderpal Singh Bhullar, a prisoner of conscience in India faces the death penalty."

"People around the world have united today in over 100 cities in Chandigarh, London, Paris, Toronto and New York to demonstrate their opposition to the death penalty and to call for the release of all prisoners of conscience languishing in jails throughout the world," said, Schapinder Singh, National general secretary of Sikh Youth Of America.

All speakers spoke of the many Sikh political prisoners have been languishing in Indian jails for many years, some without charge or trial while others have been unfairly sentenced with dubious charges. The horrific tales of prisoners being beaten up and of instances of blatant injustice and violation of human rights were made public at a press conference held in August 2005, to highlight the plight of the Sikhs languishing in jails. See [http://www.sikhsangat.org/publish/printer\\_254.shtml](http://www.sikhsangat.org/publish/printer_254.shtml).

Harbhajan Singh, a Voices For Freedom activist, said, “It is a well-accepted fact that the Indian government, at the highest level, either condones or turns a blind eye to the use of torture as a means of obtaining information. Amnesty International has reported that torture, is endemic to all of the police forces in the country and there is a lack of will to prevent torture.”

Kulvir Singh Barapind, is an individual who fled persecution from India for his belief in self-determination for the Sikhs and is awaiting his fate when he is extradited from a Fresno jail. He recounted the torture he suffered in the hands of the Indian Police, during a recent interview with Voices for Freedom: “For eight days, where the police, among other torture methods, suspended me by a rope attached to my wrists behind my back. I was told the torture would be stopped only if and when he provided them with information on militants and weapons I was supposed to be hiding. I was then subsequently released in November 1988 and the fabricated charges originally lodged against me were dismissed.” Today Kulvir Singh faces the possibility of torture in the hands of the Indian authorities, if extradited.

The vigil lasted 2 hours, despite the solemn winter, all activists who were feeling wet and soggy, stood firm in their resolve to abolish the death penalty across the globe and to echo in unison for the voice of the oppressed.

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