

FEDERATION OF SIKH ORGANISATIONS, UK

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26th January 2005

The Right Honourable Tony Blair, MP
The Prime Minister
No. 10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

Dear Prime Minister,

BRITISH SIKHS APPEAL FOR UK GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR THE SIKHS LAWFUL RIGHT TO SELF DETERMINATION

Hundreds of British Sikh representatives from across the UK have just taken part in a symbolic protest outside the Indian High Commission in London on India's Republic Day. What India calls Republic Day marks the day in 1950 when India adopted its Constitution, but for minorities and nations of South Asia it is "Betrayal Day".

The aim of today's protest outside the Indian High Commission was to:

- recognise the Sikhs lawful right to self determination;
- highlight the atrocities committed against the Sikhs since 1947; and
- appreciate the demand of a freedom loving and proud Sikh Nation for Independence

Partition in 1947 resulted in 40 per cent of all Sikhs becoming refugees and an estimated 500,000 lost their lives. The Sikh homeland - Panjab: the land of the five rivers - was divided and changed from a settled and prosperous area to a violent and overcrowded frontier zone.

In 1930 political leaders declared that no constitution of independent India would be acceptable which did not give "full satisfaction" to the Sikhs. However, promises made to Sikhs prior to independence were quickly forgotten resulting in Sikh representatives refusing to sign the Indian Constitution. Article 25 of the Indian constitution even denied Sikhism separate recognition for legal purposes.

By the 1960s many Sikhs began to feel their collective voice was not being heard in India as a whole. Problems in the 1970s included diversion of Panjab's water and hydro-electric power, underdevelopment of Panjab and discrimination against Sikhs. 1973 saw the development of a Sikh movement for greater autonomy that was supported by other minorities. Discussion surrounding greater autonomy for individual states was abruptly halted by the imposition of a state of emergency in 1975.

A campaign of baptisms accompanied by non-violent protest developed in the early 1980s. The "righteous protest"¹ launched in August 1982 resulted in the arrest of tens of thousands of Sikhs at a time, overflowing the capacity of the Panjab criminal and judicial system. Riots were triggered in September of that year when police fired on a largely unarmed Sikh crowd gathered outside the Parliament buildings in New Delhi.

The treatment of Sikhs including many eminent figures when they sought to attend the Asian Games and the fact that this was largely ignored in the main stream media, added dramatically to tensions. The Indian authorities systematically discriminated against the Sikhs and suppressed all demands for greater rights and autonomy.

In June 1984 the Indian army attacked the Golden Temple Complex, the Sikhs' holiest shrine, where sacred buildings and historic artefacts were destroyed or damaged beyond repair. The unprecedented action using artillery and tanks took place on one of the most important days in the Sikh calendar, when there were huge numbers of pilgrims in attendance, which resulted in thousands of innocent Sikhs being killed in cold blood, many with their hands and feet bound, including women and children. Scores of other historical Sikh Gurdwaras were stormed by the Indian army throughout Panjab and thousands of Sikhs were arrested, tortured, and killed, including children.

The massacre was designed to crush the Sikh mass movement for greater autonomy and to "teach the Sikhs a lesson". The timing was cynical in that it was premeditated to secure right wing Hindu support in an election year. The actions by the Indian authorities continue to this day to have an immeasurable impact on Sikhs throughout the world as demonstrated by the estimated 15-20,000 Sikh demonstrators on 6 June 2004 in central London.

In November 1984 over 20,000 innocent Sikhs were massacred in Delhi and cities throughout India by well-orchestrated mobs under the direct supervision of senior Indian politicians and officials. Sikhs became the target of organised violence with murderous gangs swarming into Sikh houses, hacking the occupants to pieces, chopping off the heads of children, raping women, tying Sikh men to tyres set aflame with kerosene and pulling Sikh passengers from public transport to be lynched or burned alive.

Amnesty International in a memorandum to the Government of India, complained that far from being spontaneous expressions of popular grief and anger as made out by the authorities, the killings were the outcome of a well organised plan marked by acts of both deliberate commission and omission by important politicians of the Congress and by authorities in the administration. Successive governments in India have failed to take any actions against those responsible for the anti-Sikh pogroms of November 1984.

For the last 25-30 years all calls for freedom and independence have been suppressed by the Indian authorities, who have unleashed a rein of terror through the gross violation of human rights. The murder and disappearances of over 250,000 Sikhs since 1984 and the illegal detention and torture of Sikhs are well documented by independent human rights organisations. Virtually none of those responsible for human rights violations - including torture, deaths in custody, extra-judicial executions and "disappearances" of Sikhs have been brought to justice. An atmosphere has been created where Indian government officials believe that they

¹ Dharm Yudh Morcha

can violate people's fundamental rights with total impunity.

During the past twelve months the estimated 700,000 loyal British Sikh citizens, who contribute substantially to the vibrant multicultural British society have welcomed the massive support of UK Members of Parliament from all political parties.

We urge you to listen to the 40 to 50 members of the Labour Government, including Ministers, who have written to the Sikh Federation (UK)² to express support and sympathy for the plight of the Sikhs. In addition, 154 different UK MPs have signed Early Day Motions relating to 1984 and the violation of Sikh human rights and have called upon the UK Government to:

i) lead the international community in demanding full access to Panjab to international human rights groups and the UN

ii) take the lead in the international community to establish an independent UN inquiry into the failure of successive governments in India to take sufficient actions against those responsible for the events of November 1984

We would urge you to consider and take action on India's disregard and approach to the international community and reflect on:

- Why the Indian Government continues to deny full access to Panjab to the international community i.e. the UN Rapporteur on Torture and international human rights groups, such as Amnesty International
- Why India fails to recognise the International Criminal Court, which represents a major advance in international justice and the fight against impunity for perpetrators of international crimes
- Why India was recently the only country not to vote in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution on the protection of human rights while countering terrorism
- Why India has defied the international community and ended the long-standing moratorium on the death penalty

We would also draw your attention to the concluding remarks in the report produced by the Human Rights Advisory Group of the Panjabis In Britain All Party Parliamentary Group that was released on 11 November 2004 on the Sikh Lobby Day in a packed Attlee Suite. The lobby was attended by some 50 MPs.

The report concluded by recommending the following measures be taken by the international community:

- A UN investigation should be set up to investigate the persistent failure of successive Indian Governments to ensure the prosecution of those alleged to be responsible for the killings and destruction. That UN initiative should require the Indian authorities to:
 - Take action against those responsible including proportionate criminal sanctions

² The first and only political party set up in the UK in September 2003.

- Ensure that the victims (or their families) are adequately compensated and provided for

- Appropriate sanctions (trade and diplomatic) should be applied, both by the UN and by individual states, in case of default by the Indian authorities in relation to these UN requirements.
- All Governments should ensure that those reportedly responsible for these gross human rights violations are denied entry to their respective States until such time they have been subjected to the due processes of investigation and criminal proceedings. Failure to do this will encourage a sense of impunity for the perpetrators. If any such persons are found to have entered the territory of any State, consideration should be given to prosecuting those persons under applicable local and international law.
- Threats of violence and intimidation against those championing the rights of the victims and their families and seeking prosecution of the guilty should be roundly condemned. The international community must require India to secure the safety of human rights defenders so that justice can be done.

We would greatly welcome your thoughts and responses to our concerns. Our expectations of the Labour Government are high as we enter into the run up to a General Election. We hope you will make a personal commitment to represent the best interests of British Sikhs on the world stage and reflect positively on the UK Government position towards support for the Sikhs lawful right to self determination.