

INTERNATIONAL SIKH CONFEDERATION

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His Excellency Mr. Nicholas Sarkozy,

President of Republic of France

Your Excellency,

We are writing to you on behalf of the global Sikh community. As President of a country whose constitution is based on the virtues of Liberty, Fraternity and equality, you are keenly aware of the importance of religious freedom, as set forth in the European Convention on Human Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, to which France is a party.

We were very moved by your speech on 25th Sept. 2007 to the UN General Assembly when you said: **“Attachment to one’s faith, to one’s language and culture and to one’s way of life, thought and belief - all this is natural, legitimate and profoundly human... to deny that is to sow the seeds of humiliation. A clash of civilizations will not be averted by forcing everyone to think and believe alike;**

cultural and religious diversity must be accepted everywhere and by all.”

When France passed a law in March 2004, banning any ostensible display of a religious symbol in school, it was not only a blow to the religious freedom that you defended at the UN, but it also affected the right to education. The consequence of the law was that the Transport and Home Ministers started to require Sikhs to bare their heads for their driving license, passports and refugee cards.

The Turban is the most recognizable feature of a Sikh. Unlike other head coverings, it is an inextricable part of the Sikh identity and is worn by Sikhs at all times to cover their unshorn hair, a mandatory article of their faith. As a part of the core identity of a Sikh, this law essentially has the effect of banning the practice of the Sikh religion in France.

As a result of the 2004 law, French Sikh children have been expelled from schools and French Sikhs have also been unable to continue with their normal lives or obtain healthcare because they refuse to bare their heads for their photographs on their ID documents.

You must be aware that six Sikh schoolchildren and two adults have unsuccessfully turned to the French courts for redress. They are now appealing their cases to the European Court of Human Rights and the

UN Human Rights Committee. UNITED SIKHS, one of the signatories below, will file for third party intervention in these cases in order to reinforce the importance of the Turban to Sikhs. **These cases have not been filed in defiance of France but only because they were left with no other recourse.**

The French Sikh litigants have argued before the French courts, that the Turban poses no security threat as a **Sikh is recognizable only because of his Turban and not without it.** Further, the Turban does not interfere with identification in today's age of biometric photos, as evidenced by the fact that French immigration does not prohibit a Sikh national from any other country who wears a turban on his passport photo.

We are aware that the law banning religious signs in schools was passed to promote secularity. However, Sikhs are non-proselytistic; wearing the Turban is an expression of a Sikh's identity and in no way threatens the secular space in French society.

Our shared history starts with the Sikh Raj in the 19th Century, when General Allard wore a Turban and beard as a general in the Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army. Many Turbaned Sikh soldiers fought and died for French freedom in World War I and World War II. They continue to fight for freedom, as members of UN peace keeping forces.

We are aware of your magnanimous and pragmatic approach to multiculturalism and diversity. We respectfully implore that you repeal the law that bans the wearing of the Turban in schools and on ID photos so that French Sikhs too may enjoy the freedoms in modern France or risk alienating the Sikh community altogether.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Lt. Gen. Kartar Singh Gill PVSM (Retd.)

ON BEHALF OF

- 1. ALL SIKHS AND SIKH ORGANISATIONS OF CHANDIGARH, PUNJAB AND HIMACHAL PRADESH GATHERED HERE TODAY.**
- 2. ALL SIKHS AND SIKH ORGANISATIONS (OUR MEMBERS) IN USA, CANADA, UK, EURO COUNTRIES, AUSTRALIA, MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE, AFRICAN COUNTRIES AND MIDDLE EAST.**