



7 August 2015

Campaign for Release of Sikh Prisoners

The Sikh Council UK reaffirms support for the ongoing campaign for the release of Sikh prisoners in India. The campaign has recently received a massive boost due to the ongoing and lengthy hunger strike by Bapu Surat Singh.

Many of the prisoners were imprisoned during the 1980's and 1990's using extremely regressive and draconian legislation that was specifically enacted and gave extraordinary powers to the Police and Army. This was in response to a campaign in support of the legitimate claims of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution including for improved access to water and electricity, recognition for the Punjabi language, location of the State capital within the State etc – in effect a campaign for better rights and treatment for the State and its people. Indiscriminate use of these powers has subsequently been described as genocide of Sikhs.

A campaign has continued for many years for the release of these prisoners some of whom have already served extremely lengthy sentences, or may be in ill health, or are very elderly. In some cases the legitimacy of the conviction itself can be questioned and in some cases the imprisoned person is subject to further proceedings in cases that have already spanned many years.

Sikh Council UK commends all those in the Punjab and across the world who have campaigned for many years on this issue and worked to support the prisoners and their families.

The hunger strike by Bapu Surat Singh has served to galvanise the community behind the campaign and through his personal sacrifice, Bapu Surat Singh has raised awareness of the issue in a manner that is unprecedented.

Sikh Council UK is aware there are essentially two strands to the ongoing campaign – legal and political. It is important that both of these strands are pursued simultaneously to seek redress for the individual prisoners but also to effect change for the better in India.

Sikh Council UK believes all efforts need to continue to take full advantage of due legal recourse and processes. A recent decision by the Supreme Court has restored the power of discretion available to State Governments, albeit with some exceptions. Where appropriate these powers of discretion should be vigorously pursued.

Sikh Council UK is also aware that a number of Sikh prisoners have repeatedly been granted parole on a number of occasions. Based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds Sikh Council UK calls on these prisoners to be granted indefinite parole.

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Sikh Council UK is aware that Sikh Organisation for Prisoner Welfare (SOPW), an affiliate organisation of Sikh Council UK, have done a great deal of work supporting prisoners and their families and have a legal team in India working on this issue as well as having a senior representative on the Bapu Surat Singh Sangarash (Coordinating) Committee.

Sikh Council UK is supportive of the work being done by SOPW and others including various Advocates in India and is in regular dialogue with many of these.

As well as the legal strand there is also a strand of the campaign that is focused on achieving political change to address these issues. Many of the concerns that Sikhs were campaigning on prior to and during the 1980's and 1990's are just as relevant today. These issues will essentially require a political settlement.

Many of these Sikh prisoners were originally pursued, prosecuted, convicted and imprisoned under the powers of the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, commonly referred to as TADA. This legislation was widely recognised to be extremely regressive and draconian and led to widespread violations of human rights in the Punjab. The discredited TADA was eventually allowed to lapse in 1995 yet those who were imprisoned under its powers remain languishing in prison. Sikh Council UK calls on Indian legislators to address this severe inconsistency as a matter of urgency.

Many affiliate organisations of Sikh Council UK are extremely active in campaigning for these changes and have been so for many years. Similarly there are many others who are campaigning across the world on these issues.

Recent collective campaigning efforts in the UK have included protests, demonstrations, meetings, lobbying of Parliament and of individual politicians, Parliamentary Early Day Motion, letter writing, media work, raising awareness in Gurdwaras, liaising with human rights organisations etc. Whereas Sikh Federation UK have had meetings with the USA Embassy in the UK (as Bapu Surat Singh residing in the USA), as well as writing to MP's.

Sikh Council UK believes the massive awareness raised by Bapu Surat Singh's hunger strike has galvanised the whole community into action and strengthened and rejuvenated the campaign. Where appropriate, Sikh Council UK will continue to support these campaigning efforts and to raise this issue with relevant authorities either directly or through our affiliated member organisations or third parties.

END

Notes for Editors:

- The Sikh Council UK is the largest representative body of Sikhs in the UK.
- The organisation is recognised as the national advocate for British Sikhs in the UK and at the European Union
- It is a membership based, democratic and representative organisation.

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