

Act Now to Protect Sikhs in America

The Indian government has long persecuted Sikhs in India and abroad, creating a culture of abuse and impunity for gross human rights violations. A recently foiled assassination plot organized by India against a U.S. citizen marks the latest progression of this violence. These acts are not part of a rogue operation; they are part of a global assassination program targeting Sikhs, authorized by the highest levels of the Indian government.

All evidence suggests that India will target others on U.S. soil. We ask all Americans to come forward in solidarity to ensure that Sikhs and all Indian minority communities living in the U.S. are safe from India's transnational repression. We must bring India and all responsible officials to account.

WHAT WE KNOW

A senior field officer with the Indian government ordered the assassination of a Sikh American on U.S. soil. The intelligence official, based in India, recruited an Indian national named Nikhil Gupta to hire a hitman, who, unbeknownst to them, was a confidential informant for the DEA. They intended to murder Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a Sikh activist and lawyer.

U.S. federal prosecutors filed a sealed indictment against Gupta in June 2023 in the Southern District of New York, and then superseded it with a more detailed indictment in November. Authorities are presently detaining Gupta in the Czech Republic, pursuant to an extradition request made by the U.S. The Czech Constitutional Court is presently considering Gupta's appeal to stop the extradition; the Indian government is eager to see him prevail and is pressuring U.S. and Czech authorities to drop the extradition. The U.S. also expelled an Indian intelligence agent from San Francisco in the summer of 2023 and denied India permission to replace its intelligence chief in Washington, D.C.

The news arrived in the wake of the assassination of a Canadian Sikh citizen, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in Vancouver in June 2023. PM Trudeau alleged a few months later that the Indian government directed the murder, a claim substantiated by British and American intelligence, as well as the Gupta indictment, which suggests that there are "many targets" for assassination in the U.S.-based Sikh community.

India denies Trudeau's allegations, and in response to the U.S. indictment, a spokesperson said they "take seriously" such matters and that they had convened a "high-level inquiry committee."

It remains unclear when the Biden administration first learned of the plot to target Pannun. The Associated Press suggests it was not until July 2023, but it would be very odd for a sensitive prosecution of this nature to be withheld from the White House for weeks. The timing is significant because Congress and the President honored Modi with a joint address and state dinner on June 22, just over a week before. In addition, the FBI issued a community advisory to Sikhs in the U.S. warning about potential threats and violence against them in March 2023.

The Washington Post reported in April 2024 that Samant Goel, India's intelligence chief, approved the assassination program, and that Modi's national security adviser, Ajit Doval, likely did too.

HISTORY OF INJUSTICE AGAINST SIKHS

Sikhs have faced violence in India since its modern inception in 1947. More recently, in 1984, organized mobs murdered thousands of Sikhs across 40 cities in genocidal violence, all orchestrated by the state and ruling Congress party. These massacres were followed by over a decade of atrocities in Punjab, where security forces tortured, murdered, and disappeared many thousands of Sikhs. Indian courts have routinely ignored and dismissed calls for justice and accountability. It is within this context that some Sikhs, both in India and abroad, including Pannun and Nijjar, have advocated for the creation of a Sikh homeland in South Asia called Khalistan. Both men were engaged in such protected speech.

AUTHORITARIANISM UNDER MODI

We believe a thorough investigation will find that transnational repression is now a feature of Indian foreign policy and that senior members of the Indian government authorized and approved the anti-Sikh global assassination program. PM Modi, the ruling BJP party, and their militant base, the RSS, support the Hindutva nationalist ideology that India is a Hindu nation. They believe that Hindus should enjoy a privileged status and exercise majoritarian rule. The Modi led government routinely enables and commits human rights violations across the country and in Kashmir; openly discriminates in law and practice against Muslims, Dalit and caste-oppressed communities, and other minorities; gives license to everyday hate violence targeting these communities; routinely threatens and arrests critics, including human rights defenders, journalists, and community activists; and uses misinformation and censorship, including internet blackouts, to spread its virulent ideology.

WHY IT MATTERS

All Americans, including Sikhs living in the U.S., should be able to practice their constitutional and human rights without experiencing repression from a foreign power. They must be able to gather, protest, and speak out, free from intimidation, harassment, surveillance, and violence from other nations and their agents. India must be brought to account and prevented from targeting Americans.

The assassinations are the continuation of long-standing repression targeting Sikhs and other minorities in the U.S. and elsewhere. In addition to the Nijjar and Pannun matters, the FBI warned several other Sikhs in the U.S. over the summer of 2023 that their lives could be in danger as well. There has been at least one documented instance in recent months of an Indian government operative surveilling a Sikh house of worship in the U.S. and then demanding information from a religious leader there.

The Indian government routinely turns Sikhs from America, Canada, and Britain away at its border, denies or revokes their visas to enter India, censors their social media feeds in India, often leading to their censorship in the U.S. as well, and otherwise subjects them to various forms of surveillance and coordinated harassment inside the U.S. India also coerces American technology companies operating in India to limit discussion of Sikh rights and minority issues. These forms of repression have intensified in recent weeks as some Sikhs have joined the latest round of farmers' protests in India.

If the U.S. government fails to protect Sikh Americans at this moment, Sikhs and other marginalized Indian communities living in the U.S. fear they could be next. India will undoubtedly continue to violate the rule of law and longstanding human rights principles inside the U.S., and other states will follow their example and engage in similar acts of repression, targeting their critics abroad.

What You Can Do

1. Express solidarity with the Sikh community and other affected Indian minority communities in the U.S. through statements, letters, and online posts;
2. Convene conversations about authoritarianism and human rights in India at schools, colleges, libraries, and other public spaces, centering impacted communities, activists, and scholars;
3. Demand that Nikhil Gupta be brought to trial in the U.S. as soon as possible;
4. Demand the DOJ be fully transparent about the investigation, unseal all future indictments, and prosecute all those responsible no matter how senior their position;
5. Demand the U.S. State Department designate India a Country of Particular Concern, and the U.S. government sanction any individuals and entities employed by the Indian government found to be responsible or connected to the foiled plot;
6. Call on state legislative bodies and Congress to hold hearings on transnational repression that include discussion of India;
7. Call on Congress to pass and President Biden to sign the Transnational Repression Policy Act and other carefully considered legislation;
8. Urge the U.S. to honor its commitments as a signatory to the Declaration of Principles to Combat Transnational Repression;
9. Urge the U.S. and other democracies to better coordinate on combating transnational repression, including imposing penalties like sanctions, diplomatic expulsions, and criminal charges; and
10. Insist that the Indian government cooperate fully with all investigations and clarify that India will not be allowed to absolve itself of blame via self-investigation or fanciful claims about rogue agents.

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