

# Protect Sikhs in America

The Indian government has long persecuted Sikhs in India and abroad, denying them justice and creating a culture of impunity for gross human rights violations. A recently foiled assassination plot, organized by India against a U.S. citizen, marks the progression and culmination of this violence. We ask all Americans and people committed to democratic principles to come forward to ensure that Sikhs and all Indian minority communities living in the U.S. are safe from India's transnational repression.

## WHAT WE KNOW

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

U.S. federal prosecutors filed a sealed indictment against Gupta in June in the Southern District of New York, and then superseded it with a more detailed indictment in November.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 U.S. also expelled an Indian intelligence agent from San Francisco this summer and denied India permission to replace its intelligence chief in Washington, D.C.

The news comes in the wake of the assassination of a Canadian Sikh citizen, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in Vancouver in June. Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau alleged in September 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, but it would be 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.

## HISTORY OF INJUSTICE AGAINST SIKHS

Sikhs have faced violence in India since its modern inception in 1947. More recently, organized mobs murdered thousands of Sikhs across 40 cities in the anti-Sikh pogroms of 1984, all orchestrated by the state and ruling Congress party. These massacres were followed by over a decade of gross violations 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 protected speech.

## AUTHORITARIANISM UNDER MODI

We believe a thorough investigation will find that transnational repression is now a feature of Indian foreign policy. Indian Prime Minister Modi, the ruling BJP party, and their far right base, the RSS, support the Hindutva nationalist ideology and believe that Hindus, who make up 80% of the population, should exercise majoritarian rule. The Modi government enables and commits human rights violations across the country and Kashmir; discriminates against Muslims, Christians, caste oppressed Dalit communities and other minorities; gives license to everyday hate violence; threatens and arrests critics, including human rights defenders and journalists; and uses misinformation and censorship to spread its virulent ideology.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Sikhs and all Americans 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.

The assassinations are the culmination of long-standing repression targeting Sikhs and other minorities. In addition to the Nijjar and Pannun matters, the FBI warned several other Sikhs in the U.S. over the summer 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. And the Indian government has routinely turned Sikhs away at the border, denied them visas from entering India, censored or blocked their social media feeds in India and otherwise subjected them to various forms of surveillance and harassment inside the U.S.

If the U.S. government fails to protect Sikh Americans at this moment, Sikhs and other marginalized Indian communities living in the U.S. will fear they could be next. India will continue to violate the rule of law and longstanding human rights principles inside the U.S., and other states may 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 centers featuring impacted communities, activists and scholars;
3. Demand the DOJ be fully transparent about the investigation, unseal all indictments and prosecute all those responsible no matter how senior their position;
4. Demand the U.S. government sanction any individuals and entities employed by the Indian government found to be responsible or connected to the foiled plot;
5. Call on state legislative bodies and Congress to hold hearings on transnational repression that include discussion of India;
6. Call on Congress to pass and President Biden to sign the Transnational Repression Policy Act;
7. Urge the U.S. to honor its commitments as a signatory to the Declaration of Principles to Combat Transnational Repression;
8. 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
9. Insist that the Indian government cooperate fully with all investigations.

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