



# UNITED SIKHS

*Recognize the Human Race as One*

Universal Periodic Review

Pre-Sessions 32

Statement on

Afghanistan

By: UNITED SIKHS

## UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW (UPR) PRE-SESSIONS 32 STATEMENT ON AFGHANISTAN

The International Community must protect the Sikh and Hindu Religious Minority of Afghanistan who face extinction in Afghanistan due to a serious threat to their religious freedom and security following the recent escalation of militancy.

*“There is fear and desperation in their empty eyes. They have no livelihood and no work; and their growing children receive no education. Many women and children live in their Gurdwarae (place of worship), relying on the free kitchen. These are Sikh women with children, widows and families left behind in a war-riven Afghanistan.”*

These are the words of London-based Afghan Sikh, Pritpal Singh, whose documentary ‘Mission Afghanistan’, is based on what he saw in Afghanistan in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, Rawail Singh summed up the miseries of his community in an Al Jazeera interview: *“There is only so much a community can tolerate. We can’t practice our faith openly, our children can’t go to school because of harassment; we can’t even cremate our dead without being stoned by the public.”*<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, Rawail Singh was one of the 12 Afghan Sikhs who were killed in a bomb attack in Jalalabad on 1 July 2018.

As I was finalising this statement, we received news of one of the deadliest attacks in Kabul in recent months, killing more than 50 people who had gathered to celebrate a religious festival.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h11jAyO0zg>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/12/decline-afghanistan-hindu-sikh-communities-161225082540860.html>

## **Statement delivered at the UPR Pre-sessions 32: Afghanistan**

Dear Representatives of Permanent Missions,

I am Mejjindarpal Kaur and I am delivering this statement as the International Legal Director of UNITED SIKHS<sup>3</sup>, a UN associated international advocacy NGO. Our advocacy record for religious freedom of minorities includes three successful communications to the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC) against France's ban on religious signs in schools and on ID photos.<sup>4</sup> This statement is supported by the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar (Afghan Ekta Cultural Religious Community Centre), UK, which serves the largest Afghan Sikh congregation.

This statement calls on Permanent Missions to address key recommendations to Afghanistan Sikhs and Hindus. The recent Taliban advances and terror attacks raise a real fear that Afghan Sikhs and Hindus, if not protected, will be subjected to such a level of discrimination and ill-treatment as to amount to a very real and immediate risk of persecution based on ethnic and religious identity. They are desperately in need of international protection.

UNITED SIKHS and the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar, London, also made a joint written statement on this issue to the HRC 39<sup>th</sup> Session in Geneva in September 2018.<sup>5</sup>

### **Follow-up to the second review**

During the last UPR in 2014, Afghanistan received 224 recommendations. Of these, three were on Freedom of Religion or Belief that were made by Canada, Mexico and the Czech Republic. These were accepted by Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Afghanistan responded to the Recommendations, and said, inter alia:

“...the Government provides, for the Hindu Minority, special worship places, special schools and special teaching programs for Hindu students in mixed schools. A huge piece of land has been allocated for their religious rituals. Discrimination on the bases of religious and ethnic origins is prohibited under any circumstance.”<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that Afghanistan did not refer to any support given to Sikhs, a minority that far outnumbers the Hindu community in Afghanistan.

Research by our organisation shows that the Government has failed to implement its agreed recommendations and that indeed the ground reality does not reflect the above response that was given by Afghanistan.

A senior Hindu community leader in Afghanistan, who requested anonymity for security reasons, said in a statement to UNITED SIKHS that the Hindu community has not received support for special worship places or special schools. Nor has any land been allocated for

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<sup>3</sup> [www.unitedsikhs.org](http://www.unitedsikhs.org)

<sup>4</sup> <https://unitedsikhs.org/PressReleases/PRSRLS-14-12-2012-01.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://unitedsikhs.org/UNHRC/Afghan/ProtectionForAfghanistanMinorities.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/afghanistan/session\\_18\\_-\\_january\\_2014/recommendations\\_and\\_pledges\\_afghanistan\\_2014.pdf](https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/afghanistan/session_18_-_january_2014/recommendations_and_pledges_afghanistan_2014.pdf) (Page 2; A - 136.61, 136.62, 136.63)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/regularsessions/session26/documents/a-hrc-26-2\\_en.doc](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/regularsessions/session26/documents/a-hrc-26-2_en.doc) (Page 62)

religious rituals. Senior Afghan Sikh leaders, who have also requested anonymity for security reasons, have also informed UNITED SIKHS that the Government has not provided any schools or support for Gurdwaras or allocated any land for religious use.

### **New developments since the last review**

#### **Safety and Security of Sikhs and Hindus.**

The one Hindu and 12 Sikhs who were killed by the apparently targeted bomb attack on 1 July 2018, were waiting to meet the Afghan President in Jalalabad to discuss their security and religious freedom issues pertaining to their Gurdwaras. Since then 60 incidents of terror have taken place.<sup>8</sup>

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, said in a report to the General Assembly recently that Governments worldwide need to strengthen efforts to protect Freedom of Religion or Belief while tackling the challenge of violent extremism.<sup>9</sup>

UNITED SIKHS has met the families of the victims and survivors of the 1 July bombing. The recent spate of terror attacks has ignited the very reasonable fear of a return of societal ill-treatment and discrimination against Afghan Sikhs and Hindus as they experienced during the height of the Taliban regime. As one widow of the suicide bombing told us: *“We were always shaken whenever there was a terror attack. But this time we have been uprooted. We must leave now because they have killed our husbands and our community leaders.”*

A recent memo to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) from the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar, London described religious persecution suffered by Sikhs and Hindus under the previous Taliban regime.<sup>10</sup> Since the 1 July 2018 attack, the Gurdwara Sri Guru Nanak Darbar at Jalalabad has received two threatening letters demanding Jazia, a payment which is extorted by militants from non-Muslims.

Two UK academics concluded in their reports prepared for UNITED SIKHS that the situation of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan is dire.

“The rising levels of violence in Afghanistan, combined with the diminishing economic base of Afghanistan’s Sikh and Hindu communities, as well as the low level of political influence they hold in the country as a result of their minority status, raises serious questions about their future safety and security. There is an urgent need for these issues to be addressed if Afghan society’s historic plurality is to be nurtured and sustained,” said a UK professor of social anthropology in his report on his return from Afghanistan recently. He requested anonymity for security reasons.

This year, Dr Jasjit Singh, a Research Fellow at the University of Leeds, UK, interviewed 14 Afghan Sikh families about their lives and their journeys to the UK.

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<sup>8</sup>[https://unitedsikhs.org/m\\_i\\_rights/Afghanistan/03Dec18TimelineTerrorAttacksInAfghanistan.pdf](https://unitedsikhs.org/m_i_rights/Afghanistan/03Dec18TimelineTerrorAttacksInAfghanistan.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23759&LangID=E>

<sup>10</sup>[https://unitedsikhs.org/m\\_i\\_rights/Afghanistan/MemoFromUNITEDSIKHSandGurdwaraGuruNanakDarbarSouthallUK.pdf](https://unitedsikhs.org/m_i_rights/Afghanistan/MemoFromUNITEDSIKHSandGurdwaraGuruNanakDarbarSouthallUK.pdf)

Interviewees informed him about the threats they faced in Afghanistan. One interviewee described how his youngest son had been kidnapped to become a ‘dancingboy’ and suffered severe mental health issues. Another family informed him that they had stopped their children from attending their local school as their children would have their unshorn hair cut by their classmates.<sup>11</sup>

## **Questions**

We request Missions to ask Afghanistan the following questions:

1. Has Afghanistan implemented the Recommendations on religious freedom by Canada, Mexico and the Czech republic that were agreed to during the second cycle in 2014?
2. If yes, what are the details of the implementation of the said Recommendations?

## **Recommendations**

In order to address the issues faced by Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan, we urge Permanent Missions to make the following key recommendations to Afghanistan during its upcoming review:

- 1) Implement the unfulfilled recommendations on Freedom of Religion or Belief that were made during the last review by Canada, Mexico and the Czech Republic;
- 2) Set a time frame for a fact-finding visit to Afghanistan by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to identify issues faced by religious minorities, including Sikhs and Hindus;
- 3) Establish an independent body to:
  - a) Investigate the statement by Sikh and Hindu minorities that they have not received any support for religious freedom contrary to Afghanistan’s response during the last review;
  - b) Review and produce a report for the OHCHR on all complaints of religious freedom issues faced by Sikhs and Hindus.
- 4) Due to the real risk of religious persecution of Sikhs and Hindus and threat to their security, execute a specific plan administered by United Nations Assistance Mission on Afghanistan (UNAMA) to immediately protect their places of worship, homes, schools and workplace from attacks;
- 5) If it is not possible for the Government and UNAMA to immediately protect Sikhs and Hindus from attacks and risk of religious persecution, secure their immediate relocation as protected persons in a safe country on humanitarian grounds, administered by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Thank You for your attention.

Mejindarpal Kaur, International Legal Director, UNITED SIKHS

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<sup>11</sup> [https://unitedsikhs.org/m\\_i\\_rights/Afghanistan/JasjitSinghSikhsInAfghanistan.pdf](https://unitedsikhs.org/m_i_rights/Afghanistan/JasjitSinghSikhsInAfghanistan.pdf)