

OPENING STATEMENT OF WORLD SIKH ORGANIZATION OF CANADA, AT  
STAGE II, COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE INVESTIGATION OF THE  
BOMBING OF AIR INDIA FLIGHT 182

Good morning, Mr. Commissioner. Thank you for the opportunity to make these opening submissions.

My name is Alexander Sabharwal, and I am counsel to the World Sikh Organization of Canada in these proceedings, along with my colleague, Palbinder Shergill, who is unable to attend today's hearing.

Mr. Commissioner, I will start by reviewing the terms of the order by which the World Sikh Organization has been granted intervenor status. Pursuant to your order, the WSO's participation will focus on matters affecting the reputational interests of the Sikh community. This is a very important objective, and as the WSO is the only Sikh organization present at this Inquiry, we have interpreted this role broadly. The tragic nature of the events that are the subject of this inquiry, coupled with the public nature of the inquiry, and the widespread media interest, makes our role even more critical.

Mr. Commissioner, you will hear much evidence during this Inquiry about the religious background of the victims of this tragedy, political events in Punjab, and the assumed religious and political affiliations of those responsible for this tragedy. The WSO would, with the greatest of respect, caution this Inquiry against making conclusive statements about the political and religious affiliations of as yet unidentified individuals, especially when such statements would have the effect of synonomizing the Sikh religion with terrorism.

So, let me start by saying a word or two about the Sikh religion. The Sikh religion advocates as its basic tenet, respect for all humanity, irrespective of faith, gender, race, ethnicity or caste. Founded in the late 1400s in the northern part of what is now known

as India, Sikhism, from its inception, has prohibited caste distinctions, spoken in favour of religious freedom for persons of all religious beliefs, and has practiced full equality as between men and women. Such notions were virtually unprecedented at that time. These notions today form the basis of leading human rights documents such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Sikhs today comprise the fifth largest faith community in the world. There are approximately 22 million members of the Sikh faith worldwide, with 12 million residing in India, and the balance spread throughout the rest of the world. In North America, there are approximately 700,000 Sikhs and, of that number, about 400,000 – or more than half – live in Canada. As the Commission has pointed out in its Background and Summary of the Facts, over the past century, and especially since the mid-1960s, a period which has seen significant Sikh immigration from India, Canada's Sikhs have established themselves in this country as hard-working, law abiding citizens.

The Sikh community has been a part of the rich heritage of Canadian society, Mr. Commissioner, for over 100 years. During that time, the Sikhs have shown themselves to be vital participants in their communities. The challenges faced by the Sikhs during the decades of their integration into Canadian society, are in some measure, similar to those challenges that other groups of Canadians have experienced. However, the events of the early and mid 1980s have been a watershed moment in Canadian Sikh history.

In 1984, the Sikh community was reeling from the devastating political events in India, which resulted in their holiest place of worship being destroyed by the Indian government. It was during that tumultuous year that the World Sikh Organization was founded.

The World Sikh Organization of Canada is the national representative body for Sikhs in Canada and is a part of the international body, the World Sikh Organization. The WSO is an international human rights organization. Its mandate is to promote and protect the interests of the Sikh Diaspora, as well as to advocate for the promotion of human

rights for all individuals, irrespective of race, religion, gender, ethnicity or social or economic status.

In Canada, the WSO has been active in the field of human rights, and continues to strive towards the following objectives:

- Fostering understanding and good will towards all nations, creeds, persuasions and faiths;
- Acting as a representative body and spokes-body for the Sikhs of Canada and, in this regard, liaising with governmental and non-governmental agencies and apprising them of the religious, social, legal and cultural interests of the Sikhs; and
- Achieving these objectives only in a way that is consistent with the doctrines and ethics of Sikhism, and with Canadian law.

At the time that the WSO was still in its infancy, Mr. Commissioner, the incomprehensible occurred: Air India Flight 182 exploded off the coast of Ireland on June 23, 1985. Listed as passengers on that flight were members of the Sikh, Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities. For the past 22 years, the families of the victims of this tragedy have had no closure to their grief, Mr. Commissioner. This has included the Sikh community, given the large number of Sikhs aboard the plane when it crashed. But, by the same token, the Sikh community has also sat under widespread public suspicion in a process of elimination that to many Sikhs has begun from the premise that all Sikhs are guilty until proven otherwise. In an effort to bring closure to the families of the victims, the WSO has time and again called on the Canadian Government to establish a commission of inquiry into the Air India bombing.

I would like to emphasize, Mr. Commissioner, that the WSO is deeply aware of the tragedy of the events that took place on June 23, 1985, and does not by virtue of its

presence at these proceedings in any way seek to minimize those events. Indeed, the victims of the tragedy who were of the Sikh faith were numerous, and in any event we share the concerns expressed by the family members of the victims – and that is a concern that has been echoed by yourself, Mr. Commissioner – and that is that this is a catastrophe that to date has, perhaps, been insufficiently understood by Canadians as a Canadian catastrophe. But, yet, at the same time, it is a catastrophe whose full dimensions and meaning must be understood by all Canadians. Secondly, the World Sikh Organization and the Sikh community share the view that it is crucially important that these events never be repeated again, and that those steps that have been taken thus far be looked at carefully in order to determine the extent to which they are working, and the extent to which they can be improved. Sadly, that which the families of the victims deserve – to know the identity of the culprits of this terrible crime – is the one thing that this Inquiry is unable to do.

We are pleased that this Commission has been established, Mr. Commissioner, and that the WSO has been given an opportunity to participate. We understand that the purpose of this Commission is broad. It is established as an effort to learn about the mistakes that might have been made in the past in investigating the Air India bombing so that such mistakes are not made again. For the Sikh community, the mistakes have been many. The Sikh community has been subjected to widespread investigation by the Canadian intelligence services, with many innocent Sikhs being routinely followed, wiretapped, and questioned, in an ethnic profiling process that often has seemed to make the term “Sikh” synonymous with “terrorism”. It is in that context that the WSO sees its role at this Inquiry.

One final point, Mr. Commissioner: The WSO is concerned about the tendency in these proceedings to use phrases such as “Sikh terrorism”, “Sikh terrorists” and “Sikh extremists”. Indeed, the first of these phrases, “Sikh terrorism”, has been imbedded into the terms of reference of this Inquiry. Mr. Commissioner, for the public at large, such language can leave the impression that all members of the Sikh faith are terrorists or extremists, and it is the submission of the World Sikh Organization that such language

ought to be avoided, not only because such a notion is clearly factually incorrect, but also because any such notion is offensive to the values of equality and multiculturalism on which our country and our society is built. The fact is that the vast majority of the Sikh community is made up of peaceful, law abiding members of society, as, for that matter, are the vast majority of those members of the Sikh community who believe in the importance of an independent homeland for Sikhs. Any language that would suggest anything to the contrary ought to be avoided not just out of a desire to not offend members of our society who are of the Sikh faith, but also in recognition of the fact that language has the power to influence people's views and perceptions, notwithstanding that any such effect may be unintended.

The Sikh community, Mr. Commissioner, ought not to be branded as terrorists, or as extremists.

That completes my opening, Mr. Commissioner. Thank you again, on behalf of the World Sikh Organization, for the opportunity to make this statement. I look forward to our participation in the weeks to come.

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