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Report: Sikh students face abuse from classmates

by **joshua rhett miller / metro new york**
JUN 5, 2007

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TWEED COURTHOUSE. More than three-quarters of male Sikh students in Queens said they are teased or harassed in city schools due to their identity, according to a report released yesterday.

The report revealed that 62 of 80 Sikh boys polled over the last six months said they were subjected to name-calling, threats or physical abuse. Citywide, 58.4 percent of 197 male and female Sikh students surveyed said they've been harassed, including 18.9 percent who said other students have said they look like a terrorist.

"That is not acceptable," said Amardeep Singh, executive director of the Sikh Coalition, which conducted the study. "That is not what New York is about."

The report was released less than two weeks after a 17-year-old Pakistani student at Newtown High School was arraigned on felony hate crimes for allegedly removing the turban of a 15-year-old Sikh student and chopping his hair off on May 24. Umair Ahmed, of Elmhurst, remains free on bail but faces up to seven years in prison.

Ahmed allegedly forced Vacher Harpal into a school bathroom following a verbal dispute and told the boy, "I have to cut your hair," according to Queens District Attorney Richard Brown. When Harpal asked why, Ahmed showed him a ring with Arabic inscriptions and said, "This ring is Allah. If you don't let me cut your hair, I will punch you with this ring."

Harpal's hair, which had never been cut and fell past his waist, was then cut to the neckline by Ahmed, who allegedly threw the locks into a toilet and on the floor.

City Councilman John Liu, D-Queens, said he and other lawmakers sent a letter to Schools Chancellor Joel Klein asking him to "pay attention" to such incidents. Liu

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accused Klein and the DOE of turning a “blind eye” to the issue and said “they have passively encouraged and allowed this kind of harassment to continue unabatedly. This is no trivial matter. This is comparable to having an arm or a leg cut off.”

DOE spokeswoman Dina Paul Parks said no record of Harpal’s alleged complaints has been found.

“The Department of Education does not tolerate discrimination, harassment or bullying,” according to a statement released yesterday. “Any student who engages in this kind of behavior will face disciplinary action up to and including expulsion.”

Liu was unmoved.

“I will not let the Dept. of Education off the hook on this,” he said. “Heads have to roll.”

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