

Hats, turbans part of new extra screening at airports

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WASHINGTON - Was it the monkey smuggled under a man's hat on a flight into LaGuardia Airport earlier this month? Or does the new hat screening policy reflect concerns that terrorists will find novel means to bring explosives onto airliners?

The Transportation Security Administration won't say.

But an Aug. 4 directive advising the nation's 43,000 airport screeners to scrutinize anyone wearing a head covering that might hide explosives -- be it a turban, baseball cap or beret -- is prompting bitter denunciations by Sikhs and Muslims, whose head coverings are part of their religious observance.

"We have complaints from our community that the way it's being conveyed on the ground is a mandatory pat-down [of turbans]," said Neha Singh of the Sikh Coalition, the nation's largest Sikh civil rights organization. "People who travel all the time tell us that they're stopped every time."

A Transportation Security Administration spokeswoman denied that turban pat-downs are mandatory, or that the agency is engaging in religious or ethnic profiling. "This is not a profiling issue, and in fact we have multiple measures in place to make sure profiling does not occur," said the spokeswoman, Amy Kudwa.

She said that the revised procedures urge screeners to be vigilant about any attire that might hide an improvised explosive device. She declined to be specific for security reasons. But sources who have seen the instructions say they mention several types of hats and dress as potentially suspicious, among them turbans, cowboy hats, long stocking caps and habits.

Kudwa also downplayed any connection between the new focus and the monkey smuggling incident, which occurred on a Spirit Airlines flight from Lima, Peru. "We make adjustments to our screening procedures all the time," she said.

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to insist that the policy not be implemented in a way that stigmatizes religious minorities.

"We've had only a small number of reports so far, but enough to be concerned about," said Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "One of our staffers went through the metal detector, and then was pulled back and told, 'Oh, we forgot your head scarf,' and they did a pat down."

Both Muslims and Sikhs say their main concern, which they plan to convey to senior officials in a second meeting this week, is that people who wear religious head coverings may be singled out automatically.

"Telling screeners to search people in turbans is the same as telling them to search black people or Arabs or Muslims," said Sikh Coalition director Amardeep Singh.

Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.), chairman of the House Homeland Security

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Committee, said he is monitoring complaints. "It is imperative that TSA strikes the right balance between protecting civil liberties and securing the skies," he said in a statement.
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