



Secretary Michael Chertoff
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

August 23, 2007

Dear Secretary Chertoff,

We are writing to you because we are very concerned about a recent policy shift in screening procedures for the Sikh turban in United States airports. It is our understanding that on August 4, 2007, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) changed a longstanding policy on security screenings, recommending that passengers with turbans be pulled aside for secondary searches. This means that millions of Sikh travelers will be singled out based on their religious practice, violating the spirit of religious pluralism that is a founding principle of this country.

We request that you meet with representatives of the Sikh community and other concerned communities to resolve our concerns. We want to work with TSA to develop a policy that will balance the nation's security concerns with the civil rights of those who wear religious headdresses.

As you may be aware, Sikhs are required to wear turbans as an article of their faith. The turban, worn over unshorn hair, signifies a Sikh's commitment to God, justice and social responsibility. Touching a Sikh's turban is a significant affront to his/her religious practice. In its new policy, the TSA equates searching turbans to searching a cowboy hat or a beret. This is unacceptable. A turban is religious garb, not a fashion statement.

TSA officials have admitted that the new policy, which specifically cites turbans as an example of headwear that could be used to conceal "threat items," was not thoroughly researched. Nobody responsible for this policy thought it necessary to familiarize themselves with the turban, or even confirm that a "threat item" could indeed be hidden in a turban. Nevertheless, without consulting the concerned communities, and with minimal guidance offered to their TSA screeners, the TSA's new procedures were implemented nationwide.

The TSA has also kept the new screening procedures a secret. This leaves our communities without a meaningful opportunity to comment upon the policy, or understand how their religious practices may be affected when flying. In addition, the policy on its face is vague and gives screeners unwarranted discretion to engage in

possible religious profiling. According to over two dozen reports received by the Sikh Coalition so far, it is clear that TSA field officers nationwide are interpreting the new procedures broadly to target Sikh turbans. This religious profiling also puts an official stamp of approval on the public's stereotyping of Sikhs, Muslims, Arabs and South Asians as terrorists.

Again, we request that you take up this matter urgently, and meet with our community groups to resolve the concerns raised by this new policy. While we fully appreciate the Department of Homeland Security's need to protect our citizens, the practical implementation of this policy means that screeners are conducting religious profiling. We strongly encourage the TSA and the Department of Homeland Security to reconsider their implementation of these new procedures.

We thank you for your immediate consideration of this matter, and look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,

The Sikh Coalition, undersigned co-sponsors and concerned citizens worldwide

