



Press Release

Sikh American Sues IRS over Ban on Wearing Religious Object

January 6, 2009 - Kawaljeet Tagore, a Sikh American, sued the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in Houston federal court today (Jan. 6, 2009). She claims that the IRS discriminated against her by prohibiting her from wearing a kirpan, a mandatory article of faith, on her job as a revenue agent at the Mickey Leland Federal Building in downtown Houston.

The [lawsuit](#) was filed in Houston federal district court by the Sikh Coalition, the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty of Washington, DC and Houston civil rights attorney Scott Newar.

Tagore was fired in July 2006 because she refused to remove her kirpan, a religious item that initiated Sikhs are required to wear at all times. The kirpan commonly resembles a sword, and is intended as a constant reminder to its bearer of a Sikh's solemn duty to protect the weak and promote justice for all.

"Sikhs around the world wear their kirpans while serving as government officials. Bureaucratic short-sightedness and ignorance of the Sikh religion are no reason to put a unique ban on kirpans in Houston," said Eric Rassbach, national litigation director at The Becket Fund.

The lawsuit claims that the IRS's termination of Tagore violates both the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA) and Title VII religious employment discrimination rules. It alleges that the IRS banned the kirpan as a so-called "dangerous weapon," even though the government allows hundreds of sharp knives and box cutters in the Leland Building. The edge of Tagore's kirpan is three inches long and is not sharp. Government officials banned Tagore's kirpan sight unseen, failing to conduct any examination whatsoever of the kirpan before banning it outright.

The Sikh Coalition is a national civil rights organization that works to ensure that Sikhs may freely practice their faith. The Washington-based Becket Fund is a nonpartisan, interfaith, civil rights law firm dedicated to protecting the free expression of all religious traditions. Scott Newar is a civil rights lawyer in Houston.

"Sikhs should be entitled to work for their government, just like any other American. Historically, attempts to ban wearing the kirpan have been resisted by Sikhs, just as Christians would likely resist a ban on wearing crosses," said Harsimran Kaur, legal director at the Sikh Coalition. "Kawaljeet Tagore's kirpan is not a danger to anyone. She was forced to choose between her religion or her job. That is unacceptable," she added.

Private employers have sought and embraced accommodation of Sikh kirpans across the country. The International Monetary Fund reversed its ban on wearing kirpans at its Washington, DC

headquarters in Dec. 2007. In Oct. 2007, AT&T Inc. in Ohio also reversed its workplace ban against kirpans.

Sikhism, which originated in the 15th Century in the Punjab region of South Asia is one of the world's largest religions, with over 25 million adherents. The current Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, is a practicing Sikh.

Devout Sikhs are mandated to keep five articles of faith at all times: unshorn hair, a wooden comb, an iron bracelet, cotton undergarments and the kirpan.

To arrange an interview with a Becket Fund attorney, contact Tom Carter at 202-349-7205, or 202-538-2044 (cell) or becketfund.carter@gmail.com.

To arrange an interview with the Sikh Coalition, contact Harsimran Kaur at 510.659.0900 (ext. 92) or harsimran@sikhcoalition.org.

A copy of the lawsuit, *Tagore v. United States*, is available online at <http://www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/IRSComplaint.pdf>.