



## Press Release

### For Immediate Release

#### Contact:

**Neha Singh at (212) 655.3095 (ext. 84) or (212)729-6141 OR**

**Amardeep Singh at 212.655.3095 (ext. 83) or (917) 628-0091**

### Sikh Boy's Turban Set Alight in School

(Hightstown, NJ) May 12, 2008 – New Jersey's Sikh community is outraged and fearful after an assault on a local Sikh high school student last week. A fellow student set fire to the religious turban worn by the Sikh teenager in an unprovoked attack on school.

The victim is one of only two turban-wearing Sikhs attending Hightstown High School in New Jersey. On Monday, May 5, 2008, the school held a fire drill and all students were instructed to gather on the school playground. The Sikh student was chatting to his friends when a student he did not know came up behind him and set fire to his *patka* (a smaller version of a full Sikh turban) using a lighter.

The Sikh student “felt something hot” on his head and immediately patted his *patka* to put out the flames. Disaster was averted, but a great deal of emotional damage had already been done.

“No mother should have to worry that her child could be hurt at school because of the way he looks,” said **Sukhjot Kaur**, the teenager's mother.

This is not the first time a Sikh child has been attacked in New Jersey schools. A bias-motivated attack against a Sikh boy at Marlboro High School in 2003 led to severe contusions to his head and his parents' eventual decision to move him back to school in Britain. As a result of that incident, New Jersey's Division on Civil Rights found “probable cause” that the school failed to meet its legal obligations when it did not protect the boy from bias-based harassment at school.

In 2006, Lucille Davey, New Jersey's Department of Education Commissioner, sent a strongly worded memorandum to all school principals to reinforce the need to create a safe environment specifically for Sikh students. That memorandum cited other bias incidents against Sikh students in New Jersey.

The Sikh Coalition calls on Hightstown High School to take immediate action to address this incident with the school community. Specifically, we recommend that Hightstown High School conduct a school assembly to explain what happened and why the attacker's behavior was especially atrocious; publish an article about the incident in the school newsletter; include information about Sikhs in its social studies curriculum; mandate teacher-led discussions regarding the issue in homeroom period; and do its utmost to ensure that the attacker is held accountable for his actions.

We understand that the attacker has been reported to police and suspended from school. The Sikh Coalition also calls on the local police and prosecutors to take all appropriate measures against the perpetrator, and to prosecute the incident as a hate crime, if the evidence supports such a charge.

“Hightstown High School has an obligation not only to ensure the safety of its pupils, but also to foster students’ appreciation for their community’s religious diversity,” said **Harsimran Kaur**, Staff Attorney, Sikh Coalition. “We call on the school and local police to take immediate action to ensure this does not happen again.”

Background:

Sikhism is the fifth largest world religion, with approximately 21 million adherents worldwide. Under the principals of their faith, Sikhs are mandated to leave all hair on their bodies uncut, wrapping the hair on their heads underneath a turban. Since 9/11, misperceptions about this appearance have led to hate attacks against Sikhs across the country.

For more information on Sikhs and Sikh practices, go to [www.sikhcoalition.org](http://www.sikhcoalition.org).

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