March 4, 2021

Dear Ms. Peterson:

Thank you for your letter formally acknowledging that the Department of State and the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi are closely monitoring the ongoing farmers’ protest in India. It is equally important for the Sikh American community to know that you are formally documenting human rights abuses occurring in India.

We wanted to make sure that you were also aware of developments that have transpired since our January 21 and 27 letters—specifically, that the Indian Government has escalated its efforts to thwart peaceful dissent around the farmers’ protest. Given India’s history of responding to non-violent protests with violence, as well as its abysmal human rights record against minority communities, there is strong reason to believe that if the situation is left unmitigated a greater crisis will emerge.1,2

For these reasons, the Sikh Coalition is offering to organize a formal briefing for the Department of State. The briefing will feature a series of experts who can speak to the current farmers’ protest and provide context on how the government’s anti-democratic response fits with decades of government-sanctioned minority oppression. These experts will also provide policy recommendations that can inform future U.S. engagement with India.

It is our hope that the State Department has taken notice that detentions of journalists go beyond “allegations” and have been extensively substantiated in public reporting. At least nine journalists are facing criminal charges for their reporting that Delhi police fatally shot a farmer during the January protests.3 On January 28, freelance reporter Mandep Punia and Dharmender Singh from Online News Media were both arrested while filming police. Mr. Singh was released on January 29, but Mr. Punia was denied bail and originally sent to 14 days of judicial custody; his initial charges included

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“obstructing public servants from discharging duty, causing hurt to public servants while discharging duty and endangering human life.” By contrast, in a video statement, Mr. Punia claims that both his and Mr. Singh’s cameras were purposefully destroyed. Reports Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, and the Committee to Protect Journalists issued forceful statements raising concerns around press freedom and the patterns of arrests of journalists in recent history.

Journalists are not the only group under direct threat. Nodeep Kaur, a Dalit and labor rights activist, was detained without bail from December through late February before she was released. She has recently confirmed previous reports that she was brutally beaten and sexually assaulted while in police custody. An American, Dr. Swaiman Singh, and his team were brutally beaten by police while providing free medical assistance to protestors and a climate change activist, Disha Ravi, was arrested on February 13 and held in jail by Delhi Police for nearly two weeks just for tweeting a document that held non-violent talking points in support of the farmers' protest. These and other anti-democratic actions by the Indian government were swiftly criticized and condemned internationally, but American leadership has been notably absent. Moreover, these are the rare cases that have made it into the public view; even more worrisome are the many protestors who are still in custody on superfluous charges or have been missing for weeks.

On February 10, the Indian government took another step in silencing free speech by forcing Twitter—a U.S.-based company—to face the untenable position of either permanently suspending more than 500 accounts or leaving their India-based employees to face fines and prison time. These suspensions, in addition to an unspecified number of other accounts being made inaccessible inside India, are

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4 Scroll Staff, Farm law protests: Journalist Mandeep Punia's bail plea rejected, sent to 14 days' judicial custody, Scroll.in (Jan. 30, 2021), available at https://scroll.in/latest/985542/farm-law-protests-delhi-police-detain-journalist-mandeep-punia-from-singhu-border
5 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdqGttvnxww
8 Indian police arrest, investigate journalists covering farmers' protests, Committee to Protect Journalists, (Feb. 1, 2021), available at https://cpj.org/2021/02/indian-police-arrest-investigate-journalists-covering-farmers-protests/?fbclid=IwAR0H8PVqJUEZmAikWrJ1mka332hxqFRkXgHA1gcvNg2tG43YSDuuvlaeg
9 Taran Deol, Out on bail, Dalit activist Nodeep Kaur accuses police of using caste slurs, torture, The Print, (Feb. 28, 2021), available at https://theprint.in/out-on-bail-dalit-activist-nodeep-kaur-accuses-police-of-using-caste-slurs-torture/613133/?fbclid=IwAR35BOv6qrQ0JvRg6b5VBCEx8UaKTMiHHA2TVD3wYjjOAAuJ2AP5Fc3P5pio
12 Aarefa Johari, 12 days after Delhi tractor rally, farmers are still missing — and their families are in despair, Scroll.in, (Feb. 7, 2021), available at https://scroll.in/article/986108/12-days-after-delhi-tractor-rally-farmers-are-still-missing-and-their-families-are-in-despair
simply due to account owners (including activists, journalists, and others) criticizing the conduct of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Indian government in response to the ongoing farmers’ protest. The above concerns are only some of the recent examples that further underscore the need for American global leadership to address India’s emboldened position of escalating human rights violations to suppress peaceful dissent.

President Biden has spoken publicly many times, including just last month, about how “America is back” as a leader on the world stage;14 Secretary Blinken, similarly, has reasserted the American commitment to “advancing our views on democracy and our views on human rights,”15 including during a speech to the U.N. Human Rights Council last week.16 The farmers’ protest has become a global issue, and the world is watching. The United States government has the opportunity to put its values into action now and to reposition itself as a moral leader and a champion of democracy and human rights.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and for your continued attention to these pressing matters.

Most Respectfully,

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