

March 21, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520  
**Via electronic delivery**

Subject: Support for Sikhs and Democratic Norms in India

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to you with an urgent call to action concerning the escalating human rights abuses against the Sikh community in Punjab, India. The Sikh Coalition urges the United States Department of State to take immediate action in support of democratic norms and human rights in India. Specifically, we ask that this Administration call on the Indian government to immediately end civil liberties and human rights violations of political dissenters and restore information access and media in Punjab, which are further exacerbating grave concerns around the lack of due process afforded to scores of Sikh arrestees and detainees.

Over the weekend, Indian authorities executed massive mobilizations of paramilitary and police forces, conducted multiple coordinated arrests, imposed mobile internet data<sup>1</sup> blackouts, blocked SMS services, censored media, and disproportionately targeted Sikhs and political dissenters across Punjab. These actions not only contradict human rights freedoms but also risk exacerbating civil unrest and alienation of a religious minority community. A comprehensive understanding of the current situation can only be achieved when the ability to engage in public discourse, freedom of the press, and access to information channels are fully restored.

Most Sikhs in South Asia, who live in the state of Punjab, have faced systemic oppression such as restrictions on religious practices, economic marginalization, and suppression of political dissent—including extra-judicial punishment, violence<sup>2</sup>, and a decade of enforced “disappearances.” The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom’s (“USCIRF’s”) recent annual report on India documented national, state, and local government

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<sup>1</sup> Most individuals in India are heavily reliant on mobile internet data access for everyday tasks and communications due to the limited proliferation of broadband access.

<sup>2</sup> “Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India.” *Human Rights Watch*, 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/10/17/protecting-killers/policy-impunity-punjab-india>; “Dead Silence: the legacy of human rights abuses in Punjab.” *Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights*, May 1, 1994, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/India0594.pdf>.



promotion and enforcement of policies that targeted religious minorities, and suppression of critical voices.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of State's human rights reports have documented significant human rights violations in India, including extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrest, violence against minorities, and censorship.<sup>4</sup> Prior human rights reports on India from the Department of State spanning at least a decade, indicates longstanding concerns of major human rights issues concerning "police and security force misconduct, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, and rape."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the current actions conducted under the guise of the internet and media blackout are exacerbating existing wounds and provoking new fears among Sikhs.

While many details around the current round of arrests and repressions are unclear, recent announcements suggest mobile internet data will continue to be blocked in significant areas of Punjab through at least March 23, severely impacting individuals and businesses that rely on such services. In addition to restrictions on information flow, sources have reported that authorities arrested over one hundred individuals over the weekend. Reports from today also indicate an escalation in police brutality and additional arrests. Arrests appear to be used as a means to limit further the free expression of Sikhs that may have a difference in political opinion, and authorities are using laws to detain these individuals for up to one year.

The fears of many Sikhs in Punjab and the diaspora are not unfounded as media censorship accompanied genocidal violence inflicted upon Sikhs in 1984.<sup>6</sup> More recently, there has been a decline in press freedom, coinciding with increased censorship and arrests of journalists and threats against social media executives.<sup>7</sup> The Indian government has previously charged several journalists who documented the police violence in the Farmers' Protests.<sup>8</sup> India-based employees at Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter were also threatened with fines and prison time for failing to immediately censor and remove social media content which criticized the Indian government for these restrictions.<sup>9</sup> We are deeply alarmed by the attempts to silence journalists,

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<sup>3</sup> "Country Update: India." *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, Nov. 22, 2022, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20India.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> "India 2022 Human Rights Report." *U.S. Department of State, Bureau Of Democracy, Human Rights, And Labor*, Mar. 20, 2023, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/415610\\_INDIA-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/415610_INDIA-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> "India 2011 Human Rights and Labor Report: India." *U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor*, May 24, 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/186675.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> "WELL-FOUNDED FEAR: Understanding Legal Challenges and Best Practices for Sikh Asylum Applicants and Their Attorneys." *The Sikh Coalition*, Nov. 1, 2021, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2021.11.01-asylum-report.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> "India: Government must stop crushing farmers' protests and demonizing dissenters." *Amnesty International*, Feb. 9, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/india-government-must-stop-crushing-farmers-protests-and-demonizing-dissenters/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Modi's Response to Farmer Protests in India Stirs Fears of a Pattern." *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/world/asia/india-modi-farmer-protest-censorship.html>

<sup>9</sup> "India Threatens Jail for Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter Employees." *The Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 5, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/india-threatens-jail-for-facebook-whatsapp-and-twitter-employees-11614964542>



advocates, and nonprofits covering these recent events. Social media accounts of prominent figures, including members of the Indian and Canadian parliament and celebrities, have also been blocked and restricted.

The United States must take immediate, concrete action to uphold democratic values and human rights with our allies and partners. We urge this Administration to demonstrate its commitment to civil liberties and human rights by calling on the Indian government to immediately end its abusive practices, including the information and media blackout in Punjab as well as affording due process to the Sikhs detained and arrested since Saturday. This Administration must also address the systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom repeatedly documented by the USCIRF.<sup>10</sup>

As a beacon of democracy and protector of human rights, the United States has a responsibility to denounce these injustices and ensure that our partnerships are aligned with our core values. Time is of the essence, and swift action is needed to prevent further escalation and potential violence.

Respectfully,



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Anisha Singh  
Executive Director  
The Sikh Coalition

Cc: Ambassador Rashad Hussain, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

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<sup>10</sup> "Country Update: India." *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, Nov. 22, 2022, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20India.pdf>.

