

# **ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SIKH ADVISORY BOARD FOR THE PERIOD NOVEMBER 2007 – OCTOBER 2008**

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## **1. Members of the Board**

The membership of the Sikh Advisory Board (“the Board”) from November 2007 to October 2008 remained unchanged as appointed by the Minister for Community Development, Youth & Sports (“the Minister”) for the period from November 2005 to October 2008. This was pursuant to the decision of the Minister on 18 September 2007 to extend the tenure of the current and subsequent Boards from 2 years to 3 years.

The members of the Board and the institutions they represented were as follows:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Institution</u>
Mr Amarjit Singh	Government Representative
Mr Charanjit Singh	Pardesi Khalsa Dharmak Diwan
Mr Darbara Singh	Khalsa Dharmak Sabha
Mr Gurcharan Singh	Khalsa Dharmak Sabha
Mr Habhajan Singh	Government Representative
Mr Harbans Singh	Khalsa Jiwan Sudhar Sabha
Mr Harbhajan Singh	Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha
Mr Jagdev Singh	Gurdwara Sahib Yishun
Mr Kuldip Singh	Government Representative
Mr Ranjit Singh	Sri Guru Singh Sabha
Mr Santa Singh	Pardesi Khalsa Dharmak Diwan
Mr Sarjit Singh	Central Sikh Gurdwara Board
Mr Sukhbir Singh	Sri Guru Singh Sabha
Mr Surjit Singh	Government Representative
Mr Taranjit Singh	Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha

## **2. Meetings of the Board**

The Board met quarterly with Mr Surjit Singh and Mr Amarjit Singh continuing as the Chairman and Secretary of the Board. The Board meetings were on 6 November 2007, 5 February 2008, 6 May 2008 and 5 August 2008.

## **3. Role and Tenure of the Board**

3.1 The general role of the Board continued to be advisory. However, the Board also took on an active role to spearhead initiatives that the leaders of the Sikh community entrusted to the Board (for example setting up the Task Force to review the Constitution of the Sikh Welfare Council). The Board continued to remain mindful of sensitivities and refrained from taking up issues that were within the purview and domain of the Sikh temples and institutions, unless otherwise requested by the institutions or by Government.

- 3.2 The Board was informed by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (“MCYS”) on 18 September 2007 that pursuant to Clause 20 of the “Rules for the Guidance of the Sikh Advisory Board”, the Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports had approved the term of office of the SAB to be extended to three years (previously two years) and that the limit of three consecutive terms for re-appointments of persons would only apply to members nominated by the Minister. As a result of this change in the Rules, the tenure of the current Board was extended for another year to expire in October 2008 instead of October 2007. All Sikh institutions with members on the Board were informed of this change by MCYS.

#### **4. Highlight of Major Issues Addressed By The Board**

##### **4.1 Bathing facility for deceased Sikhs**

- 4.1.1 Considerable headway was made during the year in resolving the issue of the dire need of the Sikh community in Singapore to have a dedicated facility for the washing of deceased Sikhs before their cremation. Government hospitals, with the exception of Changi Hospital and the National University Hospital, that had previously offered the use of washing facility in their mortuaries had ceased to do so after 2003.
- 4.1.2 The National Environmental Agency (NEA) was approached and they offered the Sikh community a 3+3 years lease for a deceased bathing facility at the Mandai Crematorium at \$600 per month with the attendant condition that the facility be refurbished and fitted-out by the Sikh community. This would have cost about \$80,000. As the terms offered were unattractive and the location not conducive, it was decided after consultation with the Sikh community leaders not to proceed further with this offer.
- 4.1.3 Instead, the need for a dedicated washing facility for deceased Sikhs was raised with Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the Minister for Finance and Dr Balaji Sadasivan, the Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Health (MOH) at the Ministers’ dialogue session with Sikh community leaders on the occasion of the Vesakhi celebrations on 13 April 2008 at the Central Sikh Temple. Mr Tharman’s and Dr Balaji’s assistance was sought in securing a deceased bathing facility, preferably at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH), as was the situation before the SARS crisis in 2003.
- 4.1.4 As a result of representations made to the Minister and Senior Minister of State, the SGH allowed the use of facilities in its mortuary for the bathing of deceased Sikhs on 22 August 2008.

4.1.5 The Sikh community of Singapore is grateful to the Government and, in particular, to Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam and the Senior Minister of State Dr Balaji Sadasivan for assisting the Sikh community in very satisfactorily resolving this issue.

*Afternote: The new Board (2008 – 2011) then successfully took up the issue of bathing facilities for deceased Sikhs with Tan Tock Seng Hospital and Alexandra Hospital and secured both their approvals to use their respective bathing facilities with effect from 12 March 2009. The Sikh community of Singapore now has access to the bathing facilities for their deceased at all the 5 Government Hospitals.*

#### 4.2 Project Fateh

4.2.1 Project Fateh was an initiative of the Sikh community to look at ways to arrest the spate of conversions out of the community.

4.2.2 The findings and recommendations of the Project Fateh team were presented to Sikh community leaders at a meeting chaired by MP Inderjit Singh on 8 December 2007. The meeting decided that the following steps be taken immediately:

- (a) A task force be formed, to be chaired by MP Inderjit Singh, to look into enhancing the operations of the Sikh Welfare Council (SIWEC), that was already doing a good job of supporting the welfare needs of the Sikh community. In particular, the task force was to look at the issue of shortage of funding for SIWEC's activities as well as the streamlining of operations, volunteer recruitment and retention;
- (b) Another task force be formed to be headed by Mr Balbeer Singh Mangat to explore the setting up a Sikhi-cum-Punjabi school in Singapore; and,
- (c) An informal Coordination Committee be formed, comprising leaders from all Sikh institutions, to be headed by MP Inderjit Singh. The Coordination Committee would look into implementing the recommendations of the Project Fateh Committee and other issues that were of concern/ interest to the Sikh community in Singapore.

#### 4.3 Task Force on Sikh Welfare Council (SIWEC)

4.3.1 The Board co-ordinated the setting up, composition and mandate/Terms of Reference of the Welfare Task Force formed pursuant to the Project Fateh Committee report. It was headed by MP Inderjit Singh and had as its members Mr Surjit Singh and Mr Amarjit Singh from the Board, Ms Narinder Kaur (National Library Board), Mr Jarmal Singh (past Chairman, SAB) and Mr Hernaikh Singh (Chairman, YSA).

- 4.3.2 The Task Force had its first meeting on 12 June 08 to discuss SIWEC's current structure and areas that needed further strengthening, particularly on issues such as publicity, funding, expanding the volunteer base, etc. The Task Force also considered the obvious advantages that could flow from SIWEC being eventually awarded the status of an Institution of Public Character (IPC).
- 4.3.3 The Task Force visited other Singapore community welfare organizations that had IPC status to study their set up, in particular their organization, staffing, funding support and volunteer recruitment and retention systems. These were the Methodist Welfare Home, Jamiyah Children's Home and Metta Buddhist Welfare Association. The Task Force noted that all the 3 organizations had committed senior management teams headed by a full time CEO (or equivalent appointment) that oversaw not only the day-to-day activities of the organization but also planned and organized fund raising activities on an ongoing basis to provide financial stability to the respective organizations. The Task Force also noted that there was considerable funding from the Government as these organizations looked after the elderly, young children and the disadvantaged. Nevertheless, all the organizations were required to raise a considerable proportion of their annual budget through in-house fund raising activities.
- 4.3.4 The Task Force recommended that SIWEC should continue to serve the welfare needs of Sikhs and non-Sikhs and that it should have a full-time paid administrator to oversee not only its day to day activities but also to plan its annual budget and draw up plans for raising funds to meet the budgetary requirement. The SIWEC Constitution should also clearly vest the ownership of the organization with the Sikh community through a Board of Directors comprising Heads of all the Sikh institutions. The day to day running of SIWEC should be left to a revamped Management Committee, the majority of whose members should be dedicated volunteers.
- 4.3.5 The Task Force accordingly proposed an amended Constitution for SIWEC incorporating the above ideas as well as proposing other minor changes to streamline and update the Constitution. The changes were proposed to make SIWEC more effective and responsive to the welfare needs of the community.
- 4.3.6 The proposed amended SIWEC Constitution was presented, together with an explanation of the purpose of the amendments, to Sikh community leaders on 10 July 08 for their information before seeking the Welfare Council's acceptance of the proposed amendments.

#### **4.4 Task Force on Sikhi-cum-Punjabi School**

- 4.4.1 This Task Force was also set up pursuant to the Project Fateh Committee's recommendations.
- 4.4.2 The Task Force, headed by Mr Balbeer Singh Mangat was to look into the viability of setting up a Sikhi-cum-Punjabi school in Singapore. It reported its findings to the Heads of Sikh institutions on 15 September 2008.
- 4.4.3 The Task Force reported that it considered 4 options, as follows:
  - i. Purchase of land and development of school building with minimal outdoor facilities that would cost around \$33 million.
  - ii. Rental of a Government school on a 3+3+3 year recurring lease that would cost around \$10 million to renovate and fit-out.
  - iii. Development of additional facilities at the Singapore Khalsa Association that would cost around \$3 million for the school portion, and
  - iv. Purchase of the Singapore Korean School at Lim Ah Woo Road that was on offer and that would cost around \$12 million.
- 4.4.4 The Task Force felt that options (i) and (ii) were not viable or worthwhile as investments. They recommended that options (iii) and (iv) be further considered. The meeting decided to work on purchasing the Korean School as minimal retrofitting would have been required. However, due to the short time to respond to the Korean School's tender and the inability to raise substantial funds in the short period available, this option was not pursued further
- 4.4.5 The Board is now working closely with Sikh community leaders at finding an alternative suitable site for the Sikhi-cum-Punjabi school.

#### **4.5 Halal Food Issue**

- 4.5.1 The issue of halal only food being permitted to be brought into the canteen of a government school in February 2008 upset the feelings of some members of the Sikh community as well as some Sikh institutions who raised this matter with the Board.
- 4.5.2 By way of background, Sikhism forbids its followers from consuming halal food.

- 4.5.3 The Board noted the government's unequivocal stand taken that non-halal food should be provided at all school canteens and that in view of the strong stand taken by the Government, the Sikh community should moderate the ire in the community and instead focus its efforts on ensuring compliance with the Government's stand. The Board also took the opportunity to emphasize to its members that in a multi-racial and multi-religious society like ours, we had to understand and be sensitive to each group's beliefs and practices and avoid hurting the feelings of others.
- 4.5.4 The Board appreciates the strong and effective stand taken by the Government on this sensitive and possibly divisive issue.

#### 4.6 The 300th Gurgadhi Celebrations

- 4.6.1 This event commemorated the installation of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib as “the perpetual living Guru” of the Sikhs at Sri Hazoor Sahib in Maharashtra, India.
- 4.6.2 The Board joined other Sikh institutions to commemorate the anniversary. Preparations were spearheaded by a Committee formed by the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board (CSGB).
- 4.6.3 Among the events organized to celebrate the occasion were the recitals of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib by family and friends over a period of 6 months, other religious observances, blood donation drives involving the Gurdwaras in Singapore, having a float with a replica of the Hazoor Sahib visit all the Gurdwaras in Singapore and the launching of the book “Sikhi – A Way of Life”.
- 4.6.4 The Board highlights that the book launched as part of the celebrations was a revised edition of the Sikhi syllabus taught in Government schools as part of the now defunct Religious Knowledge programme. The book was reprinted after repeated requests from the community. The book will, it is hoped, also address a knowledge gap on the religion among many young Sikhs.
- 4.6.5 The Board commends the CSGB, all Sikh institutions and the larger Sikh community for having successfully organized the 300th Gurgadhi Celebrations.

#### **4.7     “Langgar” Issue in Gurdwaras**

The Board and MP Inderjit Singh facilitated a discussion with Sikh community leaders on how to resolve concerns arising from the influx of foreign Sikh workers consuming “langgar” in our gurdwaras resulting in rising costs, less space for local families to have “langgar” together and other social issues. The meeting agreed that:

- (a)    “Langgar” should continue to be served in all gurdwaras as it was a key pillar of Sikhism;
- (b)    That when there were no individual sponsors for hosting the “langgar”, the gurdwara should do so and offer simple basic food such as rice, lentils and tea;
- (c)    Sufficient tables to be reserved at the “langgar” hall for the convenience of families wanting to have “langgar” together.

### **5.     Other Matters**

#### **5.1     Lunch with Director, ISD**

Director, ISD hosted a get-together lunch for Sikh community leaders on 28 November 2007 that was co-ordinated by the Board. Sikh community leaders were taken on a tour of the Exhibition Hall followed by the lunch. Community leaders took the opportunity to discuss racial and religious harmony issues in Singapore as well as the concerns of the Sikh community, especially on the sensitive issue of conversions to other faiths. Director, ISD and his team took note of the concerns expressed by Sikh community leaders.

#### **5.2     Taoist Federation Dinner**

The Taoist Federation invited the Sikh community to attend their Federation dinner at the Expo Hall in Changi on 9 December 2007. 2 dinner tables were taken by the community, one through the Board and the other through the CSGB.

#### **5.3     Anti-Muslim Film**

Board members were informed of the impending release of an anti-Muslim film produced by Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician. The film was an indictment of the Koran which portrayed the Koran in bad light. Members were urged to give feedback on their views and the possible impact it could have on race relations in Singapore.

**5.4    National Day Reception 2008**

Board members, Mr Darbara Singh, Mr Gurcharan Singh and Mr Santa Singh attended the National Day Reception hosted by the President on 10 August 2008.

**5.5    Sikh Nominees on IRHC**

The Board nominated LTC (Retired) Daljit Singh and Major (Retired) Ajit Singh to be the Sikh representative and alternate representative on the Inter Religious Harmony Circle (IRHC) respectively.

**5.6    Sikh Sakhi for IRHC Booklet**

The Board, with assistance from volunteer Mr Harminderpal Singh and the CSGB, contributed one Sakhi (a religious anecdote with a moral) on the theme of love for nature in a booklet published by the Inter Religious Harmony Circle (IRHC). There were contributions from other religious bodies as well.

**5.7    Inter-Racial, Inter-Religious Harmony Nite 2008**

The above event hosted by the Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society was held on 26 July 2008 at the Expo in Changi. The Chairman and Secretary of SAB and Mr Ajit Singh (Sikh representative on the IRHC) attended the event together with their spouses.

**5.8    4th Asia-Pacific Religious Interfaith Dialogue at Phnom Penh from 3-6 April 2008**

The Chairman, Mr Surjit Singh, attended the dialogue as part of the Singapore delegation. Papers on interfaith issues were presented and workshops and discussions held at the dialogue session which saw about 150 participants from 15 Asia-Pacific countries attending. Representatives from Singapore spoke on the harmonious interfaith relations in Singapore and on the roles of the Government and non-governmental organizations in promoting and cementing such harmonious relations.

**5.9    Friend of MCYS Award**

The Secretary of the SAB, Mr Amarjit Singh, was awarded the “Friend of MCYS Award 2008” for his contributions to the community and MCYS. The Board would like to congratulate Mr Amarjit Singh and recognize his services to the Sikh community.

**5.10 Case of a Sikh student not attending school**

The case of a Sikh student not attending school was referred to the Board by the Compulsory Education Board. The Board referred the case to SIWEC. Welfare Officer Mr Jasbir Singh met with the parents of the Sikh student and advised them that they could be prosecuted under the Compulsory Education Act (Cap 51) for failing to ensure that their son attended school. Mr Jasbir Singh's counseling of the parents and student resulted in the student's attendance record being improved. The Board thanks Mr Jasbir Singh and SIWEC for their efforts in resolving this matter.

**5.11 Donations by Sikh Community for the Myanmar and China civil disasters**

The Board facilitated the collection of \$22,000 through the Sikh institutions to be disbursed equally (\$11,000 each) towards the relief efforts for the Myanmar cyclone and the China earthquake victims. The donation by the Sikh community was highlighted in the local media. The Board is heartened by the support shown by the Sikh community for these important humanitarian efforts, and highlights that this is in line with the Sikh doctrine of helping the needy.

**6. Acknowledgements**

The third year of the Board's tenure had been challenging and engaging but at the same time fruitful and rewarding. The Board wishes to put on record the support, encouragement, and involvement of MP Inderjit Singh in particular as well as the cooperation received from all Sikh institutions, which enabled it to perform its duties and obligations efficiently and effectively.

The Board thanks the CSGB for allowing it the use of its premises at the Central Sikh Temple and for providing snacks and refreshments for its meetings.

The Board would also like to thank MCYS officials for their assistance and the close cooperation and facilitation rendered, which made the work of the Board that much easier.

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