

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SIKH ADVISORY BOARD
FOR THE PERIOD NOVEMBER 2008 – OCTOBER 2009**

1. Appointment of Board Members

- 1.1 The following members were appointed to serve on the Sikh Advisory Board (“the Board”) by the Minister for Community Development, Youth & Sports (“MCYS”) for the period from November 2008 to October 2011.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Institution</u>
Mr Amarjit Singh	Government Representative
Mr Darshan Singh Bajaj	Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha
Mr Gurcharan Singh	Khalsa Dharmak Sabha
Mr Habhajan Singh	Government Representative
Mr Harbhajan Singh	Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha
Mr Harjit Singh	Pardesi Khalsa Dharmak Diwan
Mr Jodh Singh	Khalsa Jiwan Sudhar Sabha
Ms Narinder Kaur	Government Representative
Mr Ranjit Singh	Sri Guru Singh Sabha
Mr Rashbar Singh	Gurdwara Sahib Yishun
Mr Santa Singh	Pardesi Khalsa Dharmak Diwan
Mr Sarban Singh	Central Sikh Gurdwara Board
Mr Sukhbir Singh	Sri Guru Singh Sabha
Mr Sukhbir Singh S/O SS	Khalsa Dharmak Sabha
Mr Surjit Singh	Government Representative

- 1.2 Following the appointments, Mr Gurcharan Singh from Khalsa Dharmak Sabha declined to take up his re-appointment on grounds of ill health. Minister, MCYS subsequently appointed Mr Pritpal Singh to be the second representative from Khalsa Dharmak Sabha.

2. Inaugural Meeting of the Board & Election of the Chairman and Secretary

- 2.1 The inaugural meeting of the reconstituted Board took place on 14 November 2008. By a unanimous voice vote, members present re-elected Mr Surjit Singh and Mr Amarjit Singh as the Chairman and Secretary respectively of the new Board.
- 2.2 Mr Surjit Singh and Mr Amarjit Singh thanked the members for their vote of confidence. Mr Surjit Singh stated, on behalf of both of them, that they would work closely with the Board members to seek their views and opinions so that the Board could continue providing sound advice and assistance to the Singapore Government and Sikh community on matters pertaining to the Sikh religion, customs and general welfare.

- 2.3 The Board also resolved that the quarterly meetings of the new Board would be held on the 1st Tuesday of February, May, August and November 2009 except when that day was a holiday, in which case the meeting would be held on the 2nd Tuesday of the that month. Mr Amarjit Singh also requested Mr Sarban Singh, the member representing the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board (CSGB) to book, in advance, the Conference Room of the Central Sikh Temple for the meetings of the Board to take place as well as to provide refreshments for the meetings. The schedule of meetings of the Board for 2009 was as follows:

3 February 2009
5 May 2009
4 August 2009
3 November 2009

- 2.4 The Chairman then briefed the meeting that the tenure of the Board had been changed from 2 years to 3 years by MCYS with effect from November 2007 to align the tenure of the Board with other advisory bodies such as the Hindu Advisory Board. The Chairman explained that the routine work of the Board included advising the government on matters affecting the Sikh religion, customs and welfare of the community, making recommendations to government agencies on the employment of Sikh temple workers and making recommendations on inviting Ministerial level Guests of Honour (GOH) for events organized by the Sikh community and institutions. The Board also assisted Sikh institutions and the community on issues concerning the Sikh faith and practices that might arise with other bodies.
- 2.5 In addition, the Chairman stated that in the year past, the Board gave inputs to the media on issues concerning the Sikh religion, assisting the Ministry of Education (MOE) on writing the content for the module on Sikhism and working with other religious and government agencies on community engagement under the auspices of the Community Engagement Programme (CEP).
- 2.6 It was also the practice of the Board to prepare and distribute an annual report of its activities and achievements to all the Sikh institutions as a means of communicating and reaching out to them directly. A Sikh Advisory Board website had also been set up for Sikhs and others in Singapore and overseas to know more about the workings and activities of the Board.
- 2.7 Following the briefing, members present agreed that the main role of the Board should continue to be advisory. However, if there was consensus and requests were received from the Heads of Sikh Institutions or from the Sikh community for the Board to provide leadership on certain tasks/programmes pertaining to the Sikh community and religion, it should seriously consider doing so for the benefit of the community.

3. Meetings of the Board in 2009

In line with the schedule agreed at the inaugural meeting on 14 November 2008, the Board met quarterly on 3 February 2009, 5 May 2009 and 4 August 2009.

4. Major Issues Addressed by the Board in 2009

4.1 Deceased Bathing Facilities at Mortuaries

4.1.1 A key achievement of the Board in 2009 was getting all Government Hospitals to allow the use of their washing facility in the mortuaries for the bathing of bodies of deceased Sikhs. The Chairman also got CEO, Alexander Hospital's approval for such deceased bathing facilities to be made available at the upcoming Khoo Teck Puat Hospital in Yishun. As a result of these efforts by the Board, all the 6 major hospitals, including the Kandang Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital, now provided facilities for bathing deceased Sikhs at their mortuaries.

4.1.2 Recommendations by the Board to improve the bathing facilities at the various mortuaries to conform to Sikh rites and practices were readily accepted and implemented by the hospital authorities concerned.

4.1.3 The Board is grateful to the government for resolving this issue that had inconvenienced the Sikh community since the outbreak of the SARS crisis in 2003. The Chairman accordingly sent a note of thanks to Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Minister of State Balaji Sadasivan for their assistance in helping the Sikh community acquire the use of bathing facilities in Government hospitals for deceased Sikhs. Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam replied that he was impressed by the progress the Sikh community in Singapore was making under the leadership of capable leaders and institutions.

4.2 Sikh Community's Position on Violence in Vienna, Austria and Related Issues

4.2.1 Arising from the violence amongst some Sikhs in Vienna, Austria that took place in June 2009 and which resulted in some deaths, the Board took the precaution of advising presidents of all gurdwaras to be on the alert and to ensure that no spillover violence or incidents occurred in their gurdwaras.

4.2.2 Separately, DPM Wong Kan Seng, in a speech he gave to emphasize the need for social cohesion in Singapore, had referred to the perpetrators of the Vienna violence as having come from a “higher caste”. The Chairman wrote to DPM Wong’s office on 7 August 2009 to highlight that Sikhism did not believe in the caste system and that Sikhism in fact, was founded as a re-action against the caste system then prevailing in India, among other reasons.

4.2.3 DPM Wong in his response to the Chairman’s note, clarified that he had mentioned "higher caste" Sikhs in his speech relying on a reference taken from various media reports. DPM Wong explained that the example given was to emphasize to Singaporeans that what happened outside Singapore could have an impact on us, due to the interconnectedness of the world today. DPM Wong’s clarification on this matter was conveyed to Sikh community leaders on 8 August 2009.

4.3 Issue of Racial Taunts

An incident that disturbed members of the Sikh community was the case of racial taunting that a member of the Sikh community and his family suffered at the hands of a group of unruly youths. Board members, at their meeting in May 2009, all agreed that the problem related to a general ignorance of the Sikh religion among some Singaporeans. The Board members agreed that efforts should be made to explain the Sikh religion to Singaporeans and in particular to school students. Cases of racial teasing and taunting in schools should be brought to the attention of the school principal. In other cases of racial abuse, reports should be made to the authorities for appropriate action, including the referral of any perpetrator to the police for enforcement action.

4.4 Kirpan Incident at 2nd Link

4.4.1 The Board took cognizance of and lent its assistance in an incident involving a Singaporean Sikh lady who was questioned at the 2nd Link checkpoint by officers from the Immigration and Checkpoint Authority (ICA) when returning from Malaysia by bus because she was carrying a kirpan on her body. The ICA officers were of the view that carrying the kirpan was not permitted as it was regarded as a weapon. The matter was resolved when the police arrived at the scene and clarified that Sikhs were allowed to carry the kirpan. As she was upset by the manner in which her case had been insensitively handled, she raised the matter with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), MP Inderjit Singh and the Board.

4.4.2 The MHA, MP Inderjit Singh and the Board met over a few meetings and agreed on the need for a Standard Operating Procedure concerning Sikhs carrying the kirpan on their body and how the authorities should handle such cases without causing any embarrassment to either party in future.

4.5 Issue of Wearing Kirpan at Work Place

The Board assisted an amritdhari (baptized) Sikh lady software engineer from India who had been posted to Singapore and was having problems at her workplace because she had been directed not to carry the kirpan on her body. She sought the help of the Board who advised her that it was permissible for an “amritdhari” Sikh to carry the kirpan on her body discreetly so long as security concerns were not compromised. Her employers were advised accordingly and the matter resolved amicably.

4.6 Case of a male Sikh student told by his school principal to remove his facial hair

A male Sikh student in a secondary school was instructed by the school principal to remove his facial hair as it was against the school rules to keep it unshorn. Upset parents of the student raised this matter with MP Inderjit Singh. The matter was amicably resolved after the school principal met officials from the Sikh Welfare Council (SIWEC) and after checking with the Ministry of Education and establishing that Sikhs were allowed to keep their facial hair. A talk on the Sikh religion, organized by the Board, was subsequently given to the principal and school staff. The Board and MP Inderjit Singh noted the problem of ignorance of the Sikh faith, and that the Sikh community should be proactive in educating the wider community about its practices and beliefs. In this regard, the Board initiated the setting up of a task force to look into forming a panel of speakers on Sikhism that could be called upon to give talks when invited to do so.

4.7 Reorganization of the Sikh Welfare Council (SIWEC)

4.7.1 SIWEC had been in urgent need of reorganization, funding and management expertise for some time now. The Board worked with other Sikh institutions to facilitate the reorganization of SIWEC by canvassing support from the leaders of the Sikh institutions in Singapore and impressing on them the need to review the organization and running of SIWEC. It was impressed upon the community leaders that a first point of call was vital if SIWEC was to be seen as the main source of support for the needy members of the community.

4.7.2 At the Council meeting on 20 June 2009, a new management council for SIWEC was elected by consensus, to take office from 1 July 2009. Jagjit Singh Sekhon would chair SIWEC for the 1st year and Harminderpal Singh would take over as Chairman in the second year of the tenure. A number of young and talented professionals were also inducted into the new SIWEC Management Council.

4.7.3 A fresh start has been made for SIWEC and it is hoped that this will lead to SIWEC being able to garner the full support of all the Sikh institutions and community to meet the anticipated needs for welfare services within the Sikh community in future.

5. Other Highlights

5.1 Meetings of the National Steering Committee and Working Group for Racial and Religious Harmony

The Board hosted the meetings of the National Steering Committee (NSC) and the Working Group for Racial and Religious Harmony on 30th September 2009 and 15 October 2009 respectively at the Sikh Center, Silat Road. The meetings were attended by Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries, Mayors and Heads of the various religious organisations in Singapore. Officers from the MCYS provided the secretarial support. The Board Chairman was the Sikh community's representative at the meeting of the NSC while the Board Secretary was the representative for the Working Group meeting. At the meeting of the NSC on 15 October 2009, the Board Chairman gave a slide presentation on Sikhs in Singapore.

5.2 Press Release on the Gaza Conflict

The Board issued a press release on 12 January 2009 to convey the concerns of the Sikh community in Singapore at the loss of innocent lives and for all those who had been adversely affected by the recent conflict in Gaza. The Board appealed for the opposing parties to respect and implement the UN Resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire and for humanitarian aid to be given to the people affected by the conflict.

5.3 Sikh community leaders' lunch with Minister MCYS, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan

5.3.1 The Heads of Sikh religious institutions and members of the Board hosted a lunch for Minister MCYS, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan at the Singapore Khalsa Association on 17 January 2009. The Permanent Secretary, MCYS and other senior officers of the Ministry also attended the lunch. Issues of concern to the Sikh community, including the likely impact of the current economic downturn on Singaporeans were discussed with the Minister and the senior officers

present. The issue of an increase in the quota of foreign workers for the Sikh religious institutions was raised by the CSGB. Minister, MCYS agreed to look into this request as well as to facilitate and support the setting up of a Social Development Unit (SDU) equivalent organization for the Sikh community in Singapore. The Board decided that this issue would be left to the Heads of Sikh Institutions to explore further.

5.3.2 The Board thanked Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and the senior officers of the Ministry for taking the time to interact with the Sikh community leaders, to understand the concerns and problems facing the community and to assist wherever possible.

5.4 Sikh Gurdwara in the West

5.4.1 The Board worked with other Sikh institutions to approach the Government to request for land and permission to have a gurdwara in the Western part of Singapore. This request was to compensate for the extra gross floor area that had been sought by the Central Sikh Temple but which was not approved by the authorities. A gurdwara in the western part of Singapore would also meet the spiritual and social needs of the Sikh community in that part of Singapore.

5.4.2 The Board is currently waiting for the Government's approval to its request.

5.5 Sikh Participation in the Indian Heritage Project (IHC)

At Dr Balaji's invitation to participate in the IHC project, the Sikh community team headed by Mr Gurdip Singh Usma gave their feedback and comments to the IHC Steering Committee on 27 June 2009. Other members in the team included Mr Surjit Singh (Advisor), Major Kuldip Singh, Mr Jaswant Singh Gill, Mr Surjan Singh, Mr Hernaikh Singh and Lt Col (retired) Charanjit Singh.

5.6 Sikhism's views on Surrogacy

The Sikh community's views were sought on the issue of surrogacy (as assistance to infertile couples seeking to have children) by the MCYS. The Board replied that Sikhism takes an enlightened view on scientific progress, which should generally be to the benefit of mankind. The fundamental principles of honesty, benevolence, equality and freedom should not be violated by proposed procedures.

5.7 Updating of SAB Website

The Board website was updated by including membership details of the Board, the e-mail contacts of the Chairman and Secretary and other relevant information. This would allow the Board to interface more effectively with the community.

5.8 New SAF Digital Pattern Uniform

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) sought the Board's views on 4 August 2009 on whether there would be any objections to having a pixellated design on the turban in view of similar changes to the uniforms. The Board replied that the proposed new design was acceptable.

6. **Other Matters**

6.1 Meeting with the Jathedar, Akal Takht

The Chairman and Secretary attended a dialogue session with the Jathedar (Head Priest) of the Akal Takht organized by the CSGB on 27 December 2008. Clarifications were sought from the Jathedar on the correct practices relating to customs and rites that were observed in the Sikh temples in Singapore. There was also general discussion on the issues facing the Sikh community worldwide as well as in Singapore, including the issue of conversion by Sikhs to other faiths.

6.2 China-Singapore Religious & Cultural Exhibition organized by the Inter Religious Organization (IRO)

The CSGB and the Board assisted the IRO in setting up a booth on Sikhism at the exhibition organized by the IRO at Suntec City in December 2009. The exhibition featured the 5 major religions in China, i.e. Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Christianity and Islam. The Sikh institutions also supported the exhibition by taking out a paid advertisement in the event's souvenir magazine.

6.3 Dialogue with Dr Balaji Sadasivan, President SINDA

The Chairman attended a dialogue session for Indian sub-ethnic groups with Dr Balaji on 5 August 2009 at the Grassroots Club. Discussions centered on the role of SINDA and how it could assist and support the Indian community. The Chairman shared with others the SIWEC model of helping the poor and needy from all walks of life and how SINDA could provide professional advice on such matters.

7. Acknowledgements

- 7.1 The first year of the Board's tenure, now revised to be from 2008 to 2011, was challenging and engaging but at the same time fruitful and rewarding. The Board would like to put on record the support, encouragement, and involvement of MP Inderjit Singh and the cooperation received from all Sikh institutions, which enabled it to perform its duties and fulfill its obligations efficiently and effectively.
- 7.2 The Board thanks the CSGB for its continued support, cooperation and assistance and for allowing it the use of its premises at the Central Sikh Temple for its meetings.
- 7.3 The Board would also like to thank MCYS officials, in particular Mr Yoganathan Ammappan and Ms Sheila Koh, for their advice, assistance and support. The close cooperation and facilitation rendered by these officers made the work of the Board that much easier to manage and handle.

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