

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SIKH ADVISORY BOARD
FOR THE PERIOD NOVEMBER 2006 – OCTOBER 2007**

1. Members of the Board

The membership of the Sikh Advisory Board (“the Board”) over the period November 2006 to October 2007 remained unchanged as appointed by the Minister for Community Development, Youth & Sports (MCYS) for the period from November 2005 to October 2007.

The members and the institutions they represented are 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 as resolved by the members in November 2005, with Mr Surjit Singh continuing as the Chairman and Mr Amarjit Singh as the Secretary of the Board. The Board met on 7 November 2006, 6 February 2007, 8 May 2007 and 7 August 2007.

3. Role of the Board

As agreed during the inaugural meeting of the presently constituted Board in November 2005, 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 the Board to lead (such as Project Fateh) when there was strong community support for such a role. The Board continued to remain mindful of sensitivities and refrained from taking up issues that were within the purview and domain of Sikh temples and institutions, unless otherwise requested by the institutions or by Government.

4. Major Highlights

4.1 Construction of the SAB Website (sikhadvisoryboard.org)

The Board set up its own website in December 2006 with members making cash contributions to defray the cost of its set up and construction which was kindly subsidized by “Active Internet Exchange Pte Ltd”. The Board is grateful to Mr Manjeet Singh Usma for his support in this regard. To minimize costs, for ease of operation and in line with the Board’s mainly advisory role, it was agreed that the website would, at this stage, be informative rather than interactive. The website sets out, *inter alia*, the history of the SAB, lists the names of the Chairmen and the Members of the last 3 Boards, the Board’s achievements etc. Further improvements to the website, such as having a section devoted to FAQs, would be initiated in future.

4.2 Bathing facility for deceased Sikhs

The Sikh community had felt a dire need to have a dedicated facility for the washing of deceased Sikhs before their cremation. This need was especially felt after the mortuary at the Singapore General Hospital, and at most other hospitals, ceased the practice of allowing bodies of the deceased to be bathed at their premises before cremation. Many members of the Sikh community were also unhappy with the alternative of washing the deceased at bathing facilities in funeral parlours, which were mostly unsuitable for the observance of religious rituals and practices according to Sikh rites.

At the request of the Sikh community, the Board took up this issue with the National Environment Agency (NEA), Ministry of the Environment, who, after exploring various options, offered a room at the Mandai Crematorium. It was suggested that the room could be renovated by the Sikh community, at its own cost, for the bathing of deceased Sikhs and for a Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL) to be issued at a nominal monthly charge. The Chairman and Secretary of the Board together with the Chairman and Welfare Officer of the Sikh Welfare Council (SIWEC), Dr Sorinder Singh and Mr Jasbir Singh respectively, visited the Mandai Crematorium to determine the suitability of the room offered for the needs of the community. The group agreed that the room was suitable for use as a bathing facility although rather extensive renovations costing around \$60,000, to be paid for by the Sikh community, would have to be undertaken to make it fit for such a use. The Sikh community has agreed to the upgrading of the room subject to the terms and conditions to be formally offered by the NEA.

4.3 Tenure of the Sikh Advisory Board

The Board was informed by MCYS on 18 September 2007 that pursuant to Clause 20 under 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 only applied 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.

4.4 Project Fateh

At the meeting of Sikh Institution leaders on 28 April 2007 to discuss the challenges facing the Sikh Community in Singapore, concerns were expressed by the leaders about subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, efforts being made by certain religious groups to convert Sikhs to their faith. Such attempts were being made not only in the institutions of higher learning but also in schools. The Sikh leaders requested Chairman, SAB to head a team that should identify the key reasons for conversions out of the Sikh faith and to suggest ways and means to stem or stop the flow of such conversions.

At the meeting of the Board on 8 May 2007, members agreed to the proposal and for Chairman, SAB to spearhead the project. Chairman, SAB stated that the team he proposed to form, comprising a mixture of seniors and youth, would adopt a consultative approach in analyzing the problem and suggesting possible solutions. All Sikh institutions and concerned individuals would be consulted.

At a subsequent meeting of the Board on 7 August 2007, Chairman, SAB reported that he had formed a team of 9 members to look into the problem of conversions among some Sikhs. The team’s project was entitled “Project Fateh (Victory)”. The team had already met up with representatives from the Young Sikhs Association Singapore (YSA), Central Sikh Gurdwara Board (CSGB) and Singapore Khalsa Association (SKA) and was arranging to meet with representatives of the other Sikh institutions.

Board members then gave their views on this subject. Many felt that the lack of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the religion were the main causes. Further, neglect by Sikh parents in giving their children exposure to the Gurdwaras, Sikh community and culture regularly were cited as possible causes. It was felt that even when Sikh children attended the Gurdwaras, they did not understand the scriptures as they were more conversant in English and not with the Gurmukhi/Punjabi language. The erosion of Sikh values due to the impact of globalization and peer pressure was another reason offered. Chairman, SAB thanked the members for their suggestions and said that these would be taken on board by the Project Fateh team in its report.

5. Meetings with MCYS and leaders of Other Institutions

5.1 Board's meeting on the Community Engagement Programme (CEP) with MCYS officials

The Board hosted a meeting with officers of the Ministry led by the Director, Community Relations and Engagement, Mr Ngiam Shih Chun, Mr Yoganathan Ammayappan, Deputy Director and Ms Joyce Thomas, Community Relations Executive on Community Engagement Programme (CEP) matters on 8 May 2007 at the Central Sikh Temple's conference room.

Mr Ngiam and Ms Joyce Thomas briefed the Board members on the CEP that MCYS spearheads. They explained that the purpose of the CEP was to manage and minimize racial and religious tensions in time of crises through the early involvement of community leaders. Officers from the MCYS had reached out to Sikh temples and Sikh leaders, inviting them to participate in the CEP. The purpose was for these leaders to issue public statements of solidarity emphasizing the unity of Singaporeans in combating attempts to stir inter-racial/religious strife whenever necessary.

Mr Ngiam commended the Sikh community's involvement with the Inter Racial Confidence Circle (IRCC) citing the fact that all the 7 Sikh temples were already involved in supporting the IRCC.

5.2 Dialogue with the President and Representatives of Majlis Ugama Islam Singapore (MUIS)

The Board hosted the President of MUIS, Mr. Mohd Alami Musa, and other office holders for a dialogue session on 7 August 2007 at the Central Sikh Temple. President MUIS commented that a central theme of the Islamic belief was that the religion encouraged its members to learn about other cultures and religions. MUIS therefore hoped to deepen their understanding of the Sikh faith and contacts with the community through such dialogues/meetings so that even in time of crises, the leaders of the 2 communities would be able to communicate and talk with each other to resolve issues.

The Muslim community had been jolted upon learning that even educated Malay/Muslim professionals had been negatively influenced by the events taking place in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world resulting in a tendency to be radicalized. The case of the recent arrest of a Muslim lawyer showed that even professionals could be easily influenced by radical propaganda and theology.

On the issue of donating organs, President Muis mentioned that a new fatwa made it permissible for the members of the Muslim community to donate their organs under the Human Organ Transplant Act (HOTA). The earlier position that required the Muslims to opt in had been found to be unsatisfactory. The

new fatwa now allowed Muslims to be covered by HOTA like the rest of Singaporeans and to opt out if they did not wish to donate their organs.

MUIS and Board members agreed to meet regularly and to organize sporting and cultural events such as the “Harmony Games” and “Food for All” Day that would encourage interaction among the Malay and Sikh youths and community members. Such events would help build strong bonds among the community leaders that would not be shaken should things go wrong. The bonds established would assist members in resolving any problems that may arise.

5.3 Meeting with the CEO of Human Organ Transplant Unit (HOTU), MOH, Ms Sally Kong

The Board organized a meeting between the Sikh Welfare Council (SIWEC) and Ms Sally Kong, the CEO, HOTU to discuss organ transplant issues as well as to appoint a Sikh liaison officer between HOTU and the Sikh community should problems arise when the organs were to be harvested. The meeting took place on 12 May 2007 at the Central Sikh Temple and was attended by the Chairman, Secretary and Mr Kuldip Singh, member (who had personal insight and experience on the issue) of the Board, and Dr Sorinder Singh, Mr Jasbir Singh and Ms Indrejit Kaur from SIWEC. After the meeting, which also addressed some concerns of the Sikh community on organ transplants, it was agreed that HOTU would contact the 2 Welfare Officers from SIWEC who would co-ordinate and assist HOTU in managing any issues relating to human transplants involving members of the Sikh community.

6. Other Matters dealt with by the Board

6.1 Interview with the Singapore Tatler Magazine

The November 2006 issue of the Singapore Tatler magazine published an interview with Chairman, SAB on Sikhism in Singapore. The same issue also had write-ups on the other major religions in Singapore.

6.2 Resolving Issues

Chairman, SAB assisted MP Inderjit Singh on resolving issues raised against the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board by one of their members with the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). The full investigation report, including recommendations were submitted to MCYS on 18 January 2008 and accepted by the Ministry.

6.3 Meeting with the incoming High Commissioner of India

Chairman, SAB attended the introductory meeting with the incoming High Commissioner of India, Dr S Jaishankar, held with the various Indian institutions and organizations in Singapore on 23 February 2007 at the Indian High Commission in Grange Road. The session was useful as it gave various

Indian institutions and organizations the opportunity to get to know the new High Commissioner as well as to network with each other.

6.4 Write-ups on Sikhism for the Ministry of Education (MOE)

The Board worked with Chairman, Singapore Sikh Education Foundation, Mr Bhajan Singh in June 2007 to assist the MOE on running through and improving the component on Sikhism that would be taught in all English schools under the Civics & Moral Education curriculum.

6.5 Asia-Pacific Regional Inter-faith Dialogue in New Zealand

Chairman, SAB attended an inter-faith conference in New Zealand together with other religious/community leaders from Singapore under the auspicious of MCYS from 29 May to 31 May 2007, the theme of which was “Building Bridges”. The Chairman found the dialogue sessions useful and enriching. His report on the trip was presented to MCYS on 11 June 2007.

6.6 Issue of “surname” for Sikhs

The issue of surname for Sikhs was raised by a member of the Sikh community in August 2007 whose wife had some trouble with her employer when filling up an application form that made it mandatory for her surname to be stated. The member wanted to know if “Singh” for the males or “Kaur” for the females were acceptable as surnames and wanted the Board’s views on the matter. The Board, after consulting learned Sikhs from the community, advised that where the forms require a surname to be used, one’s “goth” (clan name) such as ‘Sidhu’ or ‘Bajaj’ would be the surname. Where a Sikh’s official name does not include his or her “goth”, that person should use “Singh” or “Kaur” as the surname.

6.7 Singapore’s Multi-racial and Multi-religious experience

The Board was approached in September 2007 by Mr Sonny Yap, a member of a Straits Times team of writers who were writing a book on the history of the People’s Action Party and who wanted to know the Sikh community’s perspective of Singapore’s multi-racial and multi-religious experience. The Board approached MP Inderjit Singh and some learned Sikhs for their views too and gave them to the Straits Times writer on 12 October 2007.

6.8 Inter-Faith Youth Training Programme

The Board facilitated the attendance and participation by a Sikh youth representative, Mr Harveen Singh Narulla in a 2-day residential inter-faith training programme from 24-25 August 2007 organised by MUIS/Harmony Centre.

6.9 Why Sikhs cover their hair with turbans

The Board received a query from MOE's Civic and Moral Education team in August 2007 seeking answers to the question "Why Sikhs cover their hair with turbans". The Board replied that: "For a Sikh, wearing the turban is essential to keep the hair neatly tied up. It is an article of faith that symbolizes honour, courage, equality and piety."

6.10 Vetting of publications/articles on Sikhism

The year saw numerous requests by various organizations such as the Catholic News and the Buddhist Federation seeking the assistance of the Board for the vetting of articles and write-ups on Sikhs/Sikhism which was readily rendered. The article on Sikhism and Sikhs in Singapore which appeared in the September 2007 issue of the Catholic News was particularly, well received.

7. Acknowledgements

The Board has found the second year of its tenure to be very engaging, fruitful and rewarding. The Board gratefully acknowledges the whole-hearted support, encouragement, advice and cooperation given by MP Inderjit Singh and all the Sikh institutions in enabling it to perform its duties and obligations efficiently and effectively.

The Board wishes to thank the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board for allowing it the use of its premises at the Central Sikh Temple for its meetings and for providing snacks and refreshments.

The Board also wishes to place on record the assistance, cooperation and facilitation rendered by MCYS officials which has made the work of the Board that much easier.

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Secretary SAB

APPROVED BY: SURJIT SINGH
Chairman SAB