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Deputy Attorney General James M. Cole Speaks at the Community Relations Service Sikh Cultural Competency Training Preview

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Thank you, Grande, for that generous introduction. The Community Relations Service, created by the landmark Civil rights Act of 1964, has the critical role of helping State and local governments, private and public organizations, and community groups prevent and resolve racial, religious, and ethnic tensions, conflicts, and civil disorders.

That work is vitally important to the Department’s mission. I commend you and the entire CRS team for your outstanding work in Sikh communities and so many others throughout this country.

It is a great honor to join all of you as CRS previews the Department’s new cultural competency training. I would like to acknowledge the members of SALDEF, United Sikhs, the Sikh Coalition and the International Center for Advocates Against Discrimination for their ongoing assistance and support for CRS. I would also like to recognize Harpreet Singh Mokha, the Regional Director of CRS’ Philadelphia office, who will conduct today’s presentation.

This training could not be more timely. The tragic events in Oak Creek, Wisconsin just last month are a chilling reminder of the need to do all we can to foster tolerance, understanding, and respect among the diverse faiths, communities and peoples that make up America. Sikh Americans have been part of the American family for many decades – and in fact this year will mark the 100th anniversary of the first Sikh Gurdwara in the United States. Yet many do not understand the long history of the Sikh faith and culture in America. It is our hope that with greater understanding of that rich history and the contributions of Sikh Americans, there will be greater respect for our common humanity.

America was founded on the principle of equality and freedom of religion, and the search for freedom from religious persecution brought many of the earliest settlers to our shores. The freedom to worship freely and without fear – and the freedom of speech and assembly that are so important to religious freedom – are among the most fundamental and important of all American values. They allow us to learn from one another and to engage in the exchange of ideas that has allowed the diversity of faith in this nation to be a source of great strength, not of weakness or division.

This American tradition enables us to come together around shared values that reject the messages of hatred and bigotry that some might seek to send through violence. It is one of our foundational principles that people of all faiths in this great country should be able to maintain their religious identity, customs, and traditions, freely and without fear. Violence based on religious intolerance and prejudice has no place in America.

Sikh Americans must never be made to feel that their religious practices subject them to unfair scrutiny from their government. Sikh children should not have to wonder whether their faith in God will subject them to attack. No one should have to worry that they will be targeted with violence because of their religion. That is unacceptable and un-American, and we will do everything we can to prevent it.

It is essential that we engage in respectful dialogue, so that we learn all we can from each other. We must also seek as much information as possible about the nature and cause of religious hate crimes, including those directed at Sikh Americans – so that we can end them. The kind of training and outreach that CRS has undertaken is a critical step toward that goal. In addition, CRS and the Civil Rights Division will also be convening a town hall to explore this from the perspective of diverse religious groups.

We will also ask the FBI’s Advisory Policy Board, an independent federal advisory committee that is authorized to propose changes to the Uniform Crime Reports, to examine whether the

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current hate crime reporting categories should be expanded to include additional categories of religious hate crimes – particularly including hate crimes motivated by anti-Sikh bias. The Advisory Policy Board includes representatives of state and local law enforcement agencies throughout the country, and it will make an independent assessment. We will ask that it look at this issue so that there will be a systematic process for considering this question.

We hope that this training will help us develop a better understanding of Sikh Americans and the Sikh religion. That is particularly important for those of us in law enforcement, both at the federal level and among our state and local partners. The duty of law enforcement is to aid and protect every community equally – leaving no one out. Perhaps one of the best examples of that was the selflessness of the officers who responded to the terrible crimes in Oak Creek, risking their own lives to protect those who had gathered in peaceful worship.


At the Oak Creek Memorial Service just a few weeks ago, the Attorney General spoke for all of us when he pledged that the tragedy in Oak Creek will “ fuel the ongoing work . . . to seek both answers and justice . . . and to build on the unprecedented steps that have been taken to respond to threats – and to prevent violence and discrimination – aimed at our Sikh and other religious communities.”

The work of CRS and the training presentation today are part of that effort. All of you are part of that effort as well. I am confident that together we will succeed, just as this nation has succeeded in the past in overcoming other threats to civil rights and civil liberties.

Thank you very much.

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