



The Hon. Warren Entsch MP
Federal Member for Leichhardt
Chief Opposition Whip

MEDIA RELEASE

SIKHS PETITION PARLIAMENT IN AN AUSTRALIAN FIRST

29th October, 2012

THE nation's Sikh community has enlisted the help of Federal MP Warren Entsch to have Australia recognise the November 1984 killings of more than 37,000 Sikhs in India as genocide.

Up to 300 Sikhs from around the country will pack Parliament's public gallery this Thursday, when Mr Entsch (Member for Leichhardt) will table a petition of 4453 signatures - the first time the issue has been raised in the Australian Parliament.

The petition calls for the Australian Government to recognise that an organised campaign of horrific violence took place against Sikhs in November 1984, and that these killings were 'genocide' as per the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

It also calls on the Australian government to urge the Indian government to take "all reasonable measures" to bring those responsible to justice, not only for the 1984 violence but also for the ongoing persecution of Sikhs in the Punjab.

For Cairns man Daljit Singh, who first raised the issue with Mr Entsch and organised the petition, there are hopes that this event will promote recognition of a dark chapter in Sikh history.

"Every person on this planet who believes in equality and peace for mankind should support this," Daljit Singh said. "Justice delayed is justice denied."

Mr Entsch said he decided to support the petition as, after learning about the events of the last century, he was "horrified" at the way Sikhs had been treated and at what is still going on today.

"What drove me to act in particular was that the United Nations and world leaders - including the Australian Parliament in February this year - have recognised an act of genocide in Srebrenica, Bosnia, in 1995, when 7000 men and boys were massacred due to their Muslim faith," the North Queensland MP explained.

"I thought to myself, if something of that nature could be recognised so quickly by the world community, it seems unreasonable that the Sikh community has had to wait for so long.

“I hope this step will serve to raise awareness, and maybe one day there will be the same level of justice for the Sikh community as for the other groups that have been recognised.”

Conflict between religious groups in India is not new – historically, the Sikhs were a warrior people who rejected the caste system, were the only group to ever defeat the Afghans and played a pioneering role in India’s struggle for independence from the British.

But the situation deteriorated after independence in 1947, when the Sikh homeland, the Punjab, was divided, with around 200,000 Sikhs killed and even more left homeless. In 1955, attempts to have the Punjab recognised as a separate language state resulted in Sikhs being branded as “traitors” and more than 100,000 were arrested and jailed.

Despite playing a key role in defending Northern India against Pakistan in the War of 1965, they were ostracised even further when a Punjab State was finally established. In June 1984, President Indira Gandhi organised an attack on the holiest of Sikh sites, the Golden Temple, and in retaliation she was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards at 9.20am on October 31, 1984.

The assassination sparked a concerted backlash. By the afternoon, meetings were organised to plan the attacks, and that evening, rumours were spread that Sikhs were celebrating the assassination, killing Hindus and poisoning wells.

Sporadic violence began that night but on the morning of November 1, the nature of the attacks changed. Men armed with weapons and kerosene were taken to Sikh suburbs in government buses and these ‘death squads’ systematically set fire to Sikh houses, shops and temples.

They then began a process of dragging Sikh men out of their homes and beating them, before setting them alight with a tyre around the neck or by using flammable white powder. Children were not spared, either burnt on furnaces or pulled apart by the legs while their mothers were raped.

For Inderjeet Singh, now of Innisfail, it was a terrifying time. He was 19 years old and he should have been looking forward to his birthday on November 2.

“I saw my uncle set on fire and burnt to death, our family shop burnt and my friend was tied to a chair while his sister was gang-raped in front of him,” he remembers. “I didn’t know if I would turn 20 that night, I could so easily have been just another number.”

As the violence continued, the police were no help - either absent, passive spectators or actively involved. When the army was finally deployed late at night on November 1, they failed to impose a curfew or curb the violence and it took four days for the attacks to cease.

During this time, it is estimated that at least 37,000 Sikhs were killed, more than 300,000 displaced and rendered homeless, and hundreds of temples destroyed.

While the Indian Government continues to refer to the event as “anti-Sikh riots”, Sikhs around the world are calling on governments to recognise it as genocide. The same petition that will be tabled in Parliament on Thursday has already been presented to the Canadian Parliament.

Even now, Daljit Singh says the persecution of Sikhs continues in India, with people being afraid to speak openly due to pressure from the state security forces.

It has also left a legacy of arrests and disappearances, with many families never knowing what happened to their loved ones. One such case was Jaswant Singh Khalra, a human rights defender, who unearthed files showing that in just two of the Punjab's 18 districts, 25,000 Sikhs have been killed and illegally cremated.

Jaswant Singh Khalra disappeared in 1995, last seen washing his car. A year later, the Central Bureau of Investigation recommended that nine police officials be prosecuted for his kidnapping and murder.

Today, the Sikh community is well-settled in Australia, with 2011 census figures showing a population of around 100,000 Sikhs. They have fought alongside Australian troops in Gallipoli and made an ongoing contribution to society. Yet for all their positive integration, most Sikhs have retained an intense feeling of loss and there is still a determination to have the event recognised.

"Sikhs are a very hard-working people, they are settling and trying to forget their pain, but they can never forget the wounds on their minds and hearts," Daljit Singh explained.

"For Warren Entsch to take this issue to Parliament is not only unforgettable for the Sikhs in Australia, but for the whole Sikh nation around the world. To speak against cruelty and genocide is a service to mankind."

Mr Entsch will table the petition during Adjournment Debate this Thursday, November 1, between 4.30pm-5.00pm.

For media enquiries, or to speak to a Sikh representative from your area, please contact Heather Beck (Warren Entsch's office) on 0427 585 668.

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