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Statement Submitted for the Record

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Transnational Repression: Trends and Policy Approaches

June 24, 2025

India's Transnational Repression, Assassinations, and Targeting of Sikhs

Purpose:

1. To highlight India's repression of free speech, association, and criminalization of the Sikhs For Justice's peaceful campaign for the right to self-determination of the people of Punjab.
2. Hold India accountable for the violent suppression of the peaceful "Khalistan Referendum" campaign.

Key Points:

1. The foiled assassination attempts on the life of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, legal advisor to Sikhs For Justice, led to the arrest of Nikhil Gupta, an Indian national extradited to the USA from the Czech Republic.¹ Gupta is currently being tried in federal court in New York City.
2. The assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar at the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey, BC, Canada, on June 18, 2023, where he was the president.²
3. Suspicious death of Avtar Singh Khanda, a Sikh activist who died on June 15, 2023, in Birmingham hospital of suspected acute myeloid leukemia, an unlikely diagnosis.
4. Police have warned some Sikh activists living in Britain that their lives are in danger amid increased tensions over the separatist movement in India and claims of intimidation by Narendra Modi's regime, according to The Times.³
5. FBI's warning to several Sikh activists in the United States of America regarding threats to their lives, known or unknown.

Relevant Information:

The Foiled Assassination Attempt on the Life of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun

Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York; Matthew G. Olsen, the Assistant Attorney General of the Justice Department's National Security Division; Anne Milgram, the Administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration ("DEA"), and James Smith, the Assistant Director in Charge of the New York Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation ("FBI"), filed the murder-for-hire charges against Indian national NIKHIL GUPTA, a/k/a "Nick," in connection with his participation in a foiled plot to assassinate a U.S. citizen in New York City. The charges contained in a Superseding Indictment were unsealed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. The case is pending before U.S. District Judge Victor Marrero. Czech authorities arrested and detained GUPTA on June 30, 2023, under the bilateral extradition treaty between the United States and the Czech Republic.⁴

¹ https://www.justice.gov/d9/2023-11/u.s._v._gupta_indictment.pdf

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/canada-india-killing-sikh-activist-hardeep-singh-nijjar-rcna105749>

³ [Sikhs given 'threat to life' notices fear link to India \(thetimes.co.uk\)](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sikhs-given-threat-to-life-notices-fear-link-to-india)

⁴ https://www.justice.gov/d9/2023-11/u.s._v._gupta_indictment.pdf



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*U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said: "As alleged, the defendant conspired from India to assassinate, right here in New York City, a U.S. citizen of Indian origin who has publicly advocated for the establishment of a sovereign state for Sikhs, an ethnoreligious minority group in India. I am grateful that my Office and law enforcement partners neutralized this deadly and outrageous threat. We will not tolerate efforts to assassinate U.S. citizens on U.S. soil, and stand ready to investigate, thwart, and prosecute anyone who seeks to harm and silence Americans here or abroad."*⁵

There are ongoing open threats of assassination against Mr. Pannun and several other Sikh activists from Indian politicians, intelligence agencies, and some Indian nationals simply because they are leading the Khalistan Referendum campaign to liberate Punjab from Indian occupation.

India: A Global Threat to Basic Human Rights

India has been criminalizing the peaceful Khalistan Referendum campaign to liberate Punjab from Indian occupation by declaring SFJ a banned organization and its activists as "terrorists" trying to incite violence. However, the facts lead to the conclusion that the peaceful Khalistan Referendum campaign is to stop the violence against Sikhs, ongoing not only in Punjab and India since 1947 but also throughout the world since 1970.

Despite its best efforts, India has not been able to stop or tolerate the success of the unofficial Khalistan Referendum. More than one million five hundred thousand Sikhs who have voted in this referendum in eight countries (the UK, the USA, Switzerland, Austria, Australia, Italy, Canada, and New Zealand) are the voice of millions who want freedom from India but are not allowed to speak. Realizing its failure to stop the Khalistan Referendum, India has escalated the extrajudicial killing of diaspora Sikhs.

In Punjab, those who ask for their rights are detained, arrested, tortured, and arbitrarily imprisoned under the draconian laws of the British era, like UAPA. Tens of thousands of Sikhs have been extrajudicially killed. There has been ongoing genocide and econocide of Sikhs in Punjab since 1947.

Tens of thousands of Muslims and thousands of Christians have been killed in India by Hindu mobs, mostly belonging to Hindutva forces, with the connivance of India's politicians, religious leaders, and the police. Most of the time, perpetrators go unpunished, and the victims face charges.

Activists like Greta Thunberg and Meena Harris, who supported protesting farmers in Punjab, and reporters like Wall Street Journal's Sabrina Siddiqui, who asked a question from Indian Prime Minister Modi during a press conference in Washington DC in June 2024, TIME's Ashta Rajvanshi who interviewed Pannun, face rape and death threats for doing their job. For the people of Punjab, the Khalistan Referendum is the voice of the voiceless to get them out from under the 77 years of the repressive Indian regime. We want the world community to support the liberation of Punjab from Indian occupation by an official Khalistan Referendum. This is the only solution to the ongoing genocide and econocide of Sikhs in India, and now even abroad.⁶

India's Abuse of Its Laws to Target Khalistan Referendum Supporters

In July 2019, the Government of India declared SFJ an "unlawful" organization under Indian law. The intention is the criminalization of any association with or support of SFJ.

The Indian government has consistently moved to label SFJ's activities, particularly the Khalistan Referendum, as "terrorism" and to brand its supporters as "terrorists". Such charges are not only baseless, but they are also utterly absurd. SFJ is dedicated to achieving its goals through peaceful and democratic means.

⁵ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/us-attorney-announces-charges-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york>

⁶ <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1152006/indias-transnational-repression-has-become-a-global-threat-to-human-rights/>



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Nevertheless, the Indian government has now labeled scores of Khalistan Referendum supporters- in the U.S. and elsewhere- as “terrorists” and charged them in criminal cases in India for their peaceful political activities carried out in the U.S.

In December 2020, India’s National Security Advisor filed sedition and terrorism charges against Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, SFJ’s general counsel, and several other supporters of the Khalistan Referendum. Shockingly, these charges were based on our activities of “staging demonstrations outside Indian missions in countries like the USA, UK, Canada, Germany, and others” in support of the Khalistan Referendum.

The Indian government has sought to intimidate SFJ supporters by targeting their relatives who still live in India. It has arrested, detained, and prosecuted the relatives of the Khalistan Referendum campaigners in Punjab.

India’s Abuse of Interpol and International Treaties

As a part of its campaign of transnational repression, India has been abusing international law and treaties to hound and target campaigners for the Khalistan Referendum.

In particular, India attempted to issue an Interpol Red Corner Notice against Gurpatwant Singh Pannu and others for their work regarding the Khalistan Referendum. Thankfully, Interpol recognized that this request from India was a complete sham and rejected the notice.

India’s Use of Its Missions as Spy Networks

India has attempted to turn its diplomatic missions in foreign countries into spy networks for Prime Minister Modi’s government. It has sent Indian consular officials to Sikh Gurdwaras in the U.S. to recruit members of the Sikh community to spy on fellow Americans who support the Khalistan Referendum and to intimidate members of the community (including warning them that their relatives in India will face severe consequences if they support the Khalistan Referendum). In addition, the Indian missions have denied official documents like birth and death certificates to anyone who supports the Khalistan Referendum.

The use of consular officials to further the Indian government’s global suppression campaign is a blatant violation of international law. It flies in the face of the proper role of diplomatic officers.⁷

The assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada in June 2023

On September 18, 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated that his government was investigating “credible allegations” that Indian government agents had been involved in the death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, whom India had branded a “terrorist” over his advocacy of an independent Sikh State. Nijjar, 45, was shot and killed in June 2023, inside a Sikh house of worship (Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara) in Surrey, British Columbia, a suburb of Vancouver.⁸

“Any involvement of a foreign government in the killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil is an unacceptable violation of our sovereignty,” Trudeau told Parliament on Monday. “In the strongest possible terms, I continue to urge the government of India to cooperate with Canada to get to the bottom of this matter.” India rejected the allegation as “absurd”.

Hours later, Ottawa announced the expulsion of a top Indian diplomat from Canada, identified by Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly as the head of Indian intelligence.

⁷ Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (18 April 1961), Article 41 (1).

⁸ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/canada-india-killing-sikh-activist-hardeep-singh-nijjar-rcna105749>



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Assassination Attempt on the Life of Parmjit Singh Pamma in the UK

Paramjit Singh Pamma, an activist and Sikh nationalist from the state of Punjab, received political asylum in the United Kingdom in September 2000 on the grounds of potential mistreatment by Indian authorities. Pamma claimed that he was tortured in India for his political views.

Pamma, while living in the UK, was accused of masterminding the murder of Rulda Singh, head of Rashtriya Sikh Sangat. However, in 2011, the UK authorities found evidence lacking after a joint investigation with Indian authorities, and he was exonerated.

Interpol issued a Red Corner notice for Pamma's arrest in 2012 after the Indian authorities requested it. On December 18, 2015, while on a family trip in Portugal, the Portuguese Police detained Pamma, acting upon the Interpol notice. He was released on February 12, 2016, following representation from Francisca van Dunem, the Portuguese Minister for Justice.

Interpol removed Pamma's arrest warrant from its files in June 2016, stating the data registered in Interpol's files concerning Mr. Singh was not in compliance with Interpol's rules. It has been suggested that the improper submission against Pamma could have had the political motivation of silencing government opponents.

Pamma was attacked in January 2022 in Birmingham, UK, when he suffered a stab wound to his hand, but fortunately escaped serious injuries. In March 2023, Pamma's home and car were vandalized in the middle of the night by a group of assailants.

India's Criminalization of Peaceful Khalistan Referendum Campaign

The Khalistan Referendum, also called the Punjab Independence Referendum, is the reason behind the current situation involving repression, persecution, econocide, and genocide of Sikhs in Punjab and the rest of the world. Thus, it deserves the attention of the world at large, particularly Western democracies, the UN bodies, civil societies, and human rights organizations.

Punjab Independence Referendum is about voting yes or no on the question, "Should India-governed Punjab be an Independent Country?"

To suppress the Sikhs' right to free speech and association in the USA and other countries, India is using intimidation and death threats against the Khalistan Referendum activists. To repress the fundamental right to self-determination of the people of Punjab, India is labeling and equating this legal, peaceful, and democratic campaign as "terrorism".⁹

India is the Latest Member of a Growing Assassination Club

In June 2023, immediately after the assassination of Nijjar, Nikhil Gupta, an Indian national, sent a video he had received to his contact in the USA within a few hours of the assassination. It showed a man slumped over the wheel of his van, inside the Guru Nanak Sikh gurdwara. He was shot 34 times.¹⁰

According to police, Hardeep Singh Nijjar was just one of Gupta's targets. At the same time, Gupta also wrote to his contacts that he had many more targets.

According to U.S. prosecutors, Gupta was looking to arrange the murder of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a New York-based lawyer and leader of the Sikhs for Justice organization. Fortunately, Gurpatwant Singh is still alive. Gupta was planning three more assassinations in Canada and one more in the U.S.

Investigators in Canada and the United States believe that Pannun and Nijjar, both leaders in Sikhs for Justice, were targeted for organizing a global referendum for the independence of Punjab-Khalistan.

⁹ Criminalization of Khalistan Referendum in Modi's India, the report available upon request.

¹⁰ [India, Israel, Russia Are Leading the Way in Global Assassinations \(foreignpolicy.com\)](https://foreignpolicy.com)



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Because of the lack of consequences, and with even champions of the international order deploying targeted killings to advance their foreign policy, the club of assassination nations has only grown. India is the newest member. Beyond the killing of Nijjar in Canada and the plan to assassinate Pannun in New York, Pakistani intelligence believes India has also targeted at least two Pakistani residents, according to documents obtained by *The Intercept*. A separate Indian memo, subsequently published by the news outlet, purportedly instructed Indian consulates in the West to step up this “sophisticated crackdown scheme.”¹¹

Avtar Singh Khanda, a UK Sikh activist, died under suspicious circumstances on June 15, 2023

Avtar Singh Khanda, the 35-year-old Sikh activist, died in a Birmingham hospital after a short illness. His family is seeking a formal inquest into his death from the Chief Coroner for England and Wales. Avtar Singh Khanda died on June 15, 2023, after he suddenly fell ill and was admitted to a hospital in Birmingham. The official cause of death was reported as acute myeloid leukemia, a type of blood cancer, which was declared after the post-mortem.¹²

According to his friends and family, Khanda was healthy and had no signs of any illness before his death. They suspect that Indian intelligence services poisoned him.

There are unanswered questions about the days leading up to Khanda’s death. His supporters and family have said they have not received the medical records they have sought, nor evidence that backs the leukemia diagnosis. His mother, who was not able to attend the funeral after allegedly being denied a visa to the UK, stated that she believed he was poisoned.

In an interview with the Guardian, Michael Polak a barrister– who focuses on human rights cases – said Khanda had been declared “enemy No. 1” in press reports after being investigated in April 2023, by Indian intelligence services in connection to a violent March protest in front of the Indian mission in London, during which an Indian flag was pulled down and some security guards were reportedly injured.¹³

According to Shamsher Singh, a close friend of Khanda, the media reports in India that portrayed Khanda as having orchestrated the protest were categorically false, as were reports that he had been arrested or charged in the UK.

A Sikh activist in Birmingham complained that Indian police were verbally harassing him by phone and threatening his family in Punjab months before his sudden death in June, a Guardian investigation has found. The death of Avtar Singh Khanda, which family and friends have said was suspicious, coincided with a plot that was playing out across the Atlantic, where US prosecutors have alleged that an Indian government official with close ties to Indian intelligence was ordering the murder of high-profile Sikh activists in Canada and the US.¹⁴

Attacks on British Sikhs

On British soil, foreign autocrats attack their critics with impunity

Death threats are pretty routine for British Sikh journalist Jasveer Singh. His posts on social media about his community are often met with abuse. He has been called a terrorist, as have the subjects of his stories. His accounts have been reported en masse for allegedly posting offensive comments, prompting the platforms to suspend them.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/02/family-of-sikh-activist-calls-for-inquest-into-midlands-hospital-death>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/04/indian-police-accused-of-harassing-sikh-activist-in-uk-before-his-sudden-death>



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The abuse tends to flare up during moments of political scandal in India. The country's deepening ethnic and religious divisions under the Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi are plain to see in the digital realm.¹⁵

Trolling of minorities by supporters of Modi's Bhartiya Janata Party is commonplace. India has used diplomatic channels to brand diaspora groups as terrorists and has used digital channels to harass and disrupt potential opponents. Singh and other prominent Sikhs in the U.K. have received messages from X — the platform formerly known as Twitter — telling them that Indian authorities have demanded their accounts be blocked.¹⁶

India's Transnational Suppression of Dissent Cannot Continue

As the call for the Khalistan Referendum and Sikh self-determination gains popularity, India, running out of suppression methods, has resorted to extreme measures, including carrying out assassinations in foreign lands. India's aggressive campaign to suppress the Khalistan Referendum exposes its insecurities. SFJ's call to put the issue of self-determination and secession to a democratic vote challenges India's claim over Punjab. The fear that a majority might support secession in an unofficial, non-binding referendum highlights India's vulnerability.

India's tactics, as outlined here, are a mere symptom of a much larger issue: India's rejection of the right to self-determination of the Sikh people. The ongoing struggle for the right to self-determination of the Sikh community persists, transcending personal safety concerns. Until this underlying concern is addressed directly, the Indian government will continue its brutal, aggressive, and violent campaign of suppression, both in the U.S. and around the world.

The U.S. and all democratic countries must stand against India's global suppression campaign.

In the past, when other anti-democratic regimes like Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Russia have engaged in similar tactics to suppress dissent and stifle free speech violently, the international community was swift to condemn these actions. The U.S. and its allies rightly imposed sanctions on these regimes for their activities to suppress criticism and even the assassination of their opponents.

India's repressive conduct should be viewed as equally egregious if not more. However, in stark contrast, India has faced no real consequences for its actions, including planning an assassination of an American citizen on American Soil. Instead, the current Indian government has been rewarded with trade deals and an increasingly close trade relationship with the U.S.

We urge you to act and address India's violent suppression (at home and abroad) of the Khalistan Referendum, an initiative rooted in democratic principles and the peaceful expression of opinion. The Khalistan Referendum promotes using ballots to resolve contentious issues such as the Sikhs' Right to Self-Determination.

Sincerely,

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¹⁵ [Sikhs given 'threat to life' notices fear link to India \(thetimes.co.uk\)](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sikhs-given-threat-to-life-notices-fear-link-to-india)

¹⁶ <https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/on-british-soil-foreign-autocrats-target-their-critics-with-impunity/>