

## Treat turban burning as hate crime, demands US Sikh group

A Sikh advocacy group in the US has demanded that an incident of burning a Sikh teenager's turban in New Jersey last week be treated as a hate crime. It has complained of lack of police alacrity in investigation.

The incident that outraged the Sikh community in New Jersey took place last week at Hightstown High School. The victim, one of only two turban-wearing Sikhs at the school in central New Jersey who wants to remain anonymous, was attending a fire drill organised by the school on the playground when somebody he did not know came up behind him and set fire to his turban using a lighter. He felt something hot on his head and immediately patted the turban to put out the flames.

While confirming that the student who attacked the teenager has been reported to the police and expelled from the school, the New York-based Sikh Coalition has called on the police and prosecutors to take all measures against the perpetrator and to prosecute the incident as a hate crime if the evidence supports such a charge.

Harsimran Kaur, staff attorney of Sikh Coalition, told IANS the school has told them that they have taken the harshest measures against the student who committed the atrocious act.

'But I am disappointed with the slow police response. The incident took place last Monday, and they interviewed the victim only Friday. They have also not taken us into confidence on the investigation,' Kaur said.

The Sikh Coalition has said that the Hightstown High School has an obligation not only to ensure the safety of its pupils, but also to foster students' appreciation for their community's religious diversity.

In a press release, the Coalition said the boy has suffered emotional damage in the incident. His mother was quoted as saying, 'No mother should have to worry that her child could be hurt at school because of the way he looks.'

Sikh children have been attacked in New Jersey schools earlier too. A bias-motivated attack against a Sikh boy at Marlboro High School in 2003 caused him severe head injuries, prompting his parents' eventual decision to move him back to a school in Britain.

In 2006, New Jersey's Department of Education sent a memorandum to school superintendents calling on all schools to protect Sikh children from harassment. That memorandum cited quite a few bias incidents against Sikh students in the state.

In a school in New York's Queens area too, a Sikh student's hair were forcibly cut last year. The accused fellow student was convicted of hate crime in March.

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