



Transportation
Security
Administration

RECEIVED

07 NOV -6 AM 3:58

OFFICE OF
CONG. BENNIE THOMPSON
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
NOV 5 2007

The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

11-07-07A10:48 RCVD

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for your letter of September 20, 2007, expressing concern regarding the screening of passengers with head coverings, in particular, Sikhs wearing turbans. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is committed to providing a high level of security while respecting travelers' rights and liberties.

In the 6 months before the release of the most recent standard operating procedure (SOP), TSA's Office of Civil Rights and Liberties (OCRL) received two complaints from Sikh passengers concerning their screening experience, and specifically concerning the pat-down of their turbans after screening by explosives trace portal screening technology ("puffer machine"). OCRL conducted fact-finding inquiries into these matters and the reports are pending.

In the nearly 3 months since the release of the August 4, 2007 SOP, OCRL has received 20 complaints from Sikh passengers concerning their screening experiences. OCRL is conducting fact-finding inquiries into these matters.

During the past three months, TSA officials have had several productive meetings and teleconferences with representatives of Sikh organizations and other interested groups to hear their concerns. On October 16, 2007, TSA announced adjustments to the security procedures for head coverings to address the concerns while maintaining effective security. These adjustments were implemented on October 27, 2007.

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) pose the single greatest threat to aviation today, and we must take prudent steps to prevent their introduction onto passenger planes. Travelers can wear any type of clothing or head covering they wish through the security checkpoint; however, passengers may be subjected to additional screening to further evaluate any bulky item that could hide explosives or their components. This policy extends to all clothing items and is not directed at any one particular item or group.

While TSA recommends that passengers remove bulky items before proceeding through the security checkpoint we recognize that passengers may elect not to for religious, medical, or other reasons. Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) follow several protocols for screening passengers who choose not to remove bulky clothing items. These screening protocols can include explosives trace portals (where available), explosives trace detection equipment, and pat downs. Passengers will always be screened in a professional, respectful manner by a TSO of the

same gender. TSA also offers private screening to individuals that do not wish to undergo this form of screening in public.

In response to some of your specific questions about notification to the field, the most recent SOP change was issued on October 19, 2007, with an implementation date of October 27, 2007. The Screening Checkpoint SOP, a Change Summary, and a Training Power Point presentation were sent to the field. Field Training Coordinators were responsible for ensuring that TSOs completed the training that included all SOP changes prior to the October 27, 2007, implementation date.

To help you better understand the policy, the notification process and information that has been sent to the field on this issue, attached are the following documents:

- TSA Online Learning Center Courses, Inter-cultural Communication;
- Screening Checkpoint SOP Revision 7 (Sensitive Security Information);
- TSA Procedural Changes for Screening Checkpoint SOP Revision 7, Change 1, Summary of Changes – Clarifications (10-19-07) (Sensitive Security Information);
- Nethub Message, October 19, 2007, 200.00 – ROUTINE SOP Change, Screening Checkpoint SOP; and
- Nethub message, September 14, 2007, 900.0 - INFORMATION - Cultural Awareness: Common Head Coverings Posters.

For over 5 years, TSA has been participating in the Department of Justice's (DOJ) inter-agency meetings with Sikh American and Muslim American leaders. Also, TSA has worked with the Sikh-American Legal Defense Foundation (SALDEF) and DOJ to film a training video entitled "On Common Ground" at Washington Reagan National Airport. We will provide this video to all TSOs for viewing.

TSA is committed to continuing a dialogue with the Sikh community and other religious and cultural leaders to help us ensure that passengers are treated with dignity and respect during the security screening process. Our Federal Security Directors and our TSOs have received extensive cultural awareness training, and we take our obligation seriously to respect the religious and cultural beliefs of the traveling public.

We appreciate that you took the time to share your concerns with us and hope this information is helpful. If we may be of further assistance, please contact Ms. Claire Heffernan, Acting Assistant Administrator for Legislative Affairs, at (571) 227-2717.

Sincerely yours,



Kip Hawley
Assistant Secretary

Enclosures