



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

India

India – IND39708 – All India Sikh
Students Federation – Khalistan movement
– Inter-Services Intelligence
18 January 2012

1. Please provide background information on AISSF and any ill-treatment of its members by the authorities in India.

The All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF) was formed in 1943 by the Akali Dal political party “to bring the Sikh intelligentsia close to the party”. The AISSF draws most of its support from “poorer to middle-income Sikhs (not all of them students)”, while the Akali Dal is “comprised mostly of more middle class and urban or prosperous farmers”. At the time of its inception, the AISSF – considered to be on the “militant end of the Akali spectrum” – was “intimately involved with Akali politics, fighting for an independent Sikh state at partition”.¹

The AISSF seeks to “promote and propagate Sikhism amongst the college-going Sikh students”, and was reportedly “the first body to pass a resolution seeking the formation of a separate Sikh homeland”. The AISSF was reportedly banned in 1984, though this ban was rescinded in 1985. The „All India’ was reportedly dropped from the group’s name in 1991, and the AISSF now operates as the Sikh Students Federation (SSF). The group, which has split into various factions, remains active in a number of universities in Punjab. According to the UK Home Office, the organisation is based in Amritsar, with operations in Ludhiana district. The group has 50 office bearers out of a 100-member executive.²

Limited recent information was located regarding any ongoing or targeted ill-treatment of AISSF/SSF members by authorities in India. Some information was located regarding violent protests involving AISSF/SSF members and police. In August 2008, SSF activists staged a violent protest against an allegedly blasphemous act committed by Dera chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim. Police reportedly “resorted to cane charge and fired tear gas shells to disperse the protestors when they tried to break through police barricades”. Several police and SSF activists were reportedly injured.³

According to *The Hindu* in May 2007, Sikh activists and followers of the Dera Sacha Sauda sect reportedly “staged protest rallies and clashed with the police in many areas”. Police reportedly used force, and deployed tear gas to disperse the crowds. The SSF organised demonstrations in Amritsar, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Moga, Patiala and Mansa districts, and SSF activists reportedly “brandished swords and burnt the effigies of the Dera chief”.⁴

¹ Weiss, M. 2002, „The Khalistan Movement in Punjab’, Yale Center for International & Area Studies website, 25 June <http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/globalization/punjab.pdf> – Accessed 7 November 2003

² UK Home Office 2011, *Country of Origin Report – India*, 26 August, p.169

³ „Sikh Students Federation stages protest against Dera chief’ 2008, Outlook India website, source: *Press Trust of India*, 11 August http://www.outlookindia.com/pti_news.asp?id=598088 – Accessed 13 October 2011

⁴ „20 hurt as clashes spread in Punjab’ 2007, *The Hindu*, 16 May <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2007/05/16/stories/2007051606780100.htm> – Accessed 13 October 2011

While there is little current information to suggest any ill-treatment of AISSF members by the authorities, this was not always the case. In June 1984, then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi authorised Operation Bluestar, in which 2,000 troops moved into the Golden Temple in Amritsar to arrest Akali Dal leaders and other Sikh activists inside the building. The military action resulted in the deaths of an estimated 5,000 civilians, and the temple sustained substantial damage. In the months following the attack, the Indian government reportedly arrested, tortured and killed thousands of Sikhs, “including all prominent Akali leaders...Most of the AISSF’s rank and file went underground, though a number of leaders were arrested or killed”.⁵

2. Is there a link between AISSF and followers of Khalistan?

The Khalistan movement refers to the demand for an independent Sikh state – called Khalistan – in Punjab. The movement was propagated by members of the Akali Dal, and dates back to the late nineteenth century. Akali Dal – along with a number of pro-Khalistan militant groups – adopted a more assertive stance for independence in the early 1980s, which led to a crackdown by Indian authorities. Between 1984 and 1995, an estimated 25,000 Sikhs were “illegally detained, tortured, extra-judicially executed, and „disappeared”” by Indian security forces as part of counter-insurgency operations. The Khalistan movement reportedly lost traction in the 1990s.^{6 7 8}

As noted in the response to [Question 1](#), the AISSF was reportedly “the first body to pass a resolution seeking the formation of a separate Sikh homeland”. According to the UK Home Office, “[w]hile the AISSF sought a separate Sikh homeland, it did not fight for it until militancy erupted under Bhindranwale in 1981. From then onwards, a number of AISSF members joined the ranks of the militants”.⁹

3. Is there any evidence that members of AISSF are targeted by the authorities for having links with the Pakistan ISI?

No information was located to indicate that AISSF members are targeted by authorities on the grounds that they are accused of having links with the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Limited information was located suggesting that the ISI maintains links with Sikh separatists more broadly in Punjab.

In August 2009, *Thaindian News* reported that Punjab police had arrested former AISSF chief Daljit Bittu for “allegedly conspiring to kill Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Singh Badal”. Bittu had previously spent close to 10 years in gaol “for various terrorist attacks and was said to be associated with Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence”.¹⁰

⁵ Weiss, M. 2002, „The Khalistan Movement in Punjab’, Yale Center for International & Area Studies website, 25 June <http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/globalization/punjab.pdf> – Accessed 7 November 2003

⁶ Weiss, M. 2002, „The Khalistan Movement in Punjab’, Yale Center for International & Area Studies website, 25 June <http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/globalization/punjab.pdf> – Accessed 7 November 2003

⁷ Chadda, M. 2006, „Minority rights and conflict prevention: Case study of conflicts in Indian Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and Nagaland’, Minority Rights Group International website, August

⁸ South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) (undated), „Backgrounder – Punjab’, SATP website <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/punjab/backgrounder/index.html> – Accessed 5 April 2002

⁹ UK Home Office 2011, *Country of Origin Report – India*, 26 August, p.169

¹⁰ „Former student leader arrested for conspiring to kill Sukhbir Badal’ 2009, *Thaindian News*, source: IANS, 29 August http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorized/former-student-leader-arrested-for-conspiring-to-kill-sukhbir-badal_100239674.html – Accessed 13 January 2012

A December 2011 article in the *Jagran Post* reported that the ISI continues to “give support to the Khalistani terrorist groups”. The article quoted the Director General of Punjab Police, who in 2009 said that “the ISI is extremely engaged in reviving militancy in the State by providing arms and money to Sikh extremists”. According to the article, “[d]espite the dismal failure of the Khalistan movement, steady Pakistani support has been pouring in for various Sikh militant groups which retain residual capacity to cause local disruption in Punjab, an exigency that very much merges with Pakistan’s long-term strategic intent in India”.¹¹

A 2009 Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) report noted that according to intelligence agencies, “Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)... are trying to revive militancy in Punjab through sympathisers of Sikh militant groups like the Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), Khalistan Zinzabad Force (KZF) and Khalistan Commando Force (KCF)”.¹²

According to *Rediff* in 2008, an Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB) report claimed that the ISI had been “stoking increased militancy in Punjab and the north-eastern states”. Further, IB claimed that “the ISI is desperately trying to revive Sikh militancy which had died a natural death in the late 1980s...[t]he ISI has taken upon itself to roil Punjab so that it could have a partner in carrying out terror operations”.¹³

¹¹ „Pakistan attempts at revival of terrorism in Punjab’ 2011, *Jagran Post*, 9 December

<http://post.jagran.com/Pakistan-attempts-at-revival-of-terrorism-in-Punjab-1323334563> – Accessed 13 January 2012

¹² Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2009, *IND103121.E: India: The All India Sikh Federation (AISSF), including its objectives and activities, and its relationship with the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) (April 2006-March 2009)*, 16 April

¹³ „200 Pak organisations raise funds for terror: IB’ 2008, *Rediff*, 10 June

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