

TOP SECRET
CONFIDENTIAL

★ BLUESTAR

SACRIFICING SIKHS

THE NEED FOR AN INVESTIGATION

THE HIGHLY ANTICIPATED REPORT COMMISSIONED BY THE SIKH FEDERATION (UK)

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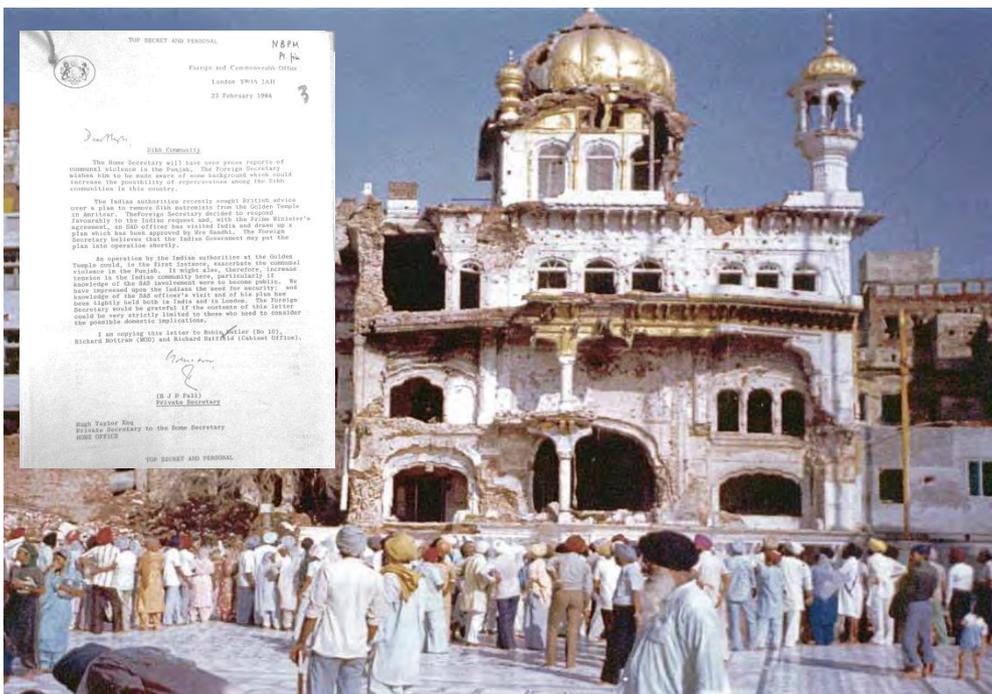


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*Damaged Akal Takht, Amritsar following Operation Bluestar in June 1984
2014 revelation of SAS support and assistance in Operation Bluestar*

Executive summary

In January 2014, top secret UK government files were accidentally released to the National Archives. They revealed that a British special forces officer visited Amritsar in 1984 to advise the Indian army ahead of an attack on the Sikh faith's holiest site, in which thousands of pilgrims were massacred. Then Prime Minister David Cameron refused calls for a public inquiry, instead hastily commissioning an in-house review which claimed that the British advice was an isolated incident that had limited impact on the subsequent attack.

The Sikh Federation (UK) first raised serious concerns on limitations of the in-house review by leading civil servant Sir Jeremy Heywood before it was published and presented to Parliament in February 2014. There were inherent limitations with the in-house review as it was rushed and deliberately too narrowly focused.

Whilst the UK government claims there is no need to investigate Britain's role in India's repression of Sikhs, this report sets out extensive evidence that raises serious concerns about the veracity of the UK's official narrative. This report is not an attempt to 're-write history', an accusation which has been directed by the British government at truth campaigns in Northern Ireland doing similar archival research. Rather, it is the Conservative government itself, through its ongoing censorship, who seems to be distorting and manipulating history to suit its own ends.

This report is a modest attempt at truth recovery and better understanding the legacy of a bitter conflict. It is the first look at the government's private account from this period of UK-Indian relations, in so far as the public are allowed access to the records. The conclusions it reaches inevitably diverge from the official narrative, precisely because it takes into account facts that the government wanted to remain hidden at the time, and still do to this day.

Extensive research by the Sikh Federation (UK) has found that British involvement in India's repression of Sikhs in 1984 went much further than the UK government has ever officially acknowledged, in that:

- **Cameron killed off his own transparency revolution** - More than half of Foreign Office files on India from 1984 have been censored in whole or in part, with civil servants centrally involved in the events of 1984 now blocking disclosures under the thirty-year rule. Information about the special forces and intelligence agencies is exempt from disclosure under the Freedom of Information and Public Records Acts, meaning that only an independent inquiry is capable of recovering the truth. *(See page 7)*
- **Cabinet Office has withheld vital records examined in the Heywood review** - A freedom of information request for these records was first submitted on 30 December 2014. There have been unacceptable delays by the Cabinet Office at each stage of the process. It is the subject of an appeal to the Information Tribunal with a three-day hearing scheduled for March 2018. More than 30 years after the event there remains a reluctance to release relevant information that will expose the UK and Indian governments. *(See page 8)*
- **Despite warnings a year earlier of disastrous consequences and a “blood bath”, Margaret Thatcher sent an SAS officer to advise on attacking Sikhs’ holiest site** - In April 1983 the British High Commissioner Sir Robert Wade-Gery warned the UK government of the disastrous consequences of “any attempt by the government to use force to enter the Golden Temple precincts.” Yet within a year of a warning of a “blood bath”, Margaret Thatcher had sent a special forces officer to advise the Indian army on how to attack the holy site and demonstrated Britain's complete support for a military solution. *(See page 17)*
- **Para-military assistance provided immediately after SAS visit** - India requested British training and equipment for its police para-military units immediately after the SAS officer had advised on co-ordinating para-military units for an attack on Amritsar. The Foreign Office wanted to supply India with internal security equipment that it knew could be used to raid Amritsar. For example, on the morning after the SAS advisor left India, the MOD sent a telegram to a company called Belstaff International Ltd, asking if it

could supply bullet proof vests to the Indian Border Security Force. (See page 26)

- **Peace talks collapsed day SAS left India** - Immediately after the SAS officer carried out his reconnaissance of Amritsar with an Indian special forces unit, Sikhs pulled out of peace talks claiming they had seen a commando unit move into the city. The negotiations never recovered, and ultimately lead to the all-out-assault in June 1984. (See page 29)
- **SAS advice on attacking the holy site increased terror threat to UK** - Although the SAS provided advice for an attack on Amritsar, Whitehall analysts said that such an assault would increase the risk of terrorism in the UK. In 1985-86, MI5's Director-general put 'Sikh extremism' at the top of the list of terrorist threats to mainland Britain, despite the fact Sikhs had never been a terrorist threat to the UK, any officials or the wider public. MI5 admitted in October 1986 that since June 1984 there had only been "relatively minor" incidences. (See page 33)
- **Were practices from British counter-insurgency campaigns shared with Indian security forces that led to excesses, including torture?** - Britain's defence attaché in India from 1983 to 1986 was a veteran of colonial counter-insurgency campaigns in Kenya and Malaya, and held a senior position in the Ulster Defence Regiment HQ at the peak of British army collusion with loyalist paramilitaries in the 1970s. This raises concerns that abusive practices from British counter-insurgency campaigns were shared with Indian security forces. (See page 14)
- **Indian army chief received confidential briefing in 1984 on counter-insurgency equipment** - The FCO files released on 20 July 2017 show in correspondence from March 1985 that the British Army advised the Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army, General Vaidya who planned Operation Blue Star in June 1984. The March 1985 letter shows he received a confidential briefing from the British Army earlier in 1984 about counter-insurgency and internal security equipment to help deal with domestic unrest from Sikhs in Punjab. This was mistakenly or more likely deliberately missed by Heywood in his review. (See page 38)
- **Advice from British experts in counter-insurgency** – There were very specific British media reports in June 1984 naming Indian intelligence officers – Giresh Chandra 'Garry' Saxena and Rameshwar Nath Kao as making trips to the UK to seek expertise. The information that has been carefully pieced together in this report about counter-insurgency support and the timing of the SAS visit brings these media reports into sharp focus. A week after the attack it was reported in the Sunday Times that 'assault troops were alerted to invade the temple no fewer than five times during the past three months' i.e. the period immediately after the SAS reconnaissance. (See page 32)
- **Whitehall expected raid on Amritsar day before Blue Star** - The UK government anticipated a raid on Amritsar the day before Operation Blue Star but did nothing to try to stop it. The UK government did not urge Indira Gandhi to seek a peaceful solution to tensions in the Punjab, and believed that a show of force would boost the Indian leader's chances of re-election. Nor did the UK government provide any warnings or travel advice to the hundreds of thousands of Sikhs living in the UK. Most Sikhs when they visit Punjab go to Amritsar suggesting the UK government was grossly negligent knowing what we know now. (See page 30)
- **Further SAS assistance considered within weeks of Amritsar massacre** - Whitehall considered and probably provided further SAS assistance to Indian forces weeks after the Amritsar massacre. One letter, in which British officials discussed possible SAS training for India's new National Security Guard, was inadvertently released to the UK National Archives in August 2016. This should have been acknowledged by Sir Jeremy Heywood in his 2014 review but was omitted, calling into question the adequacy of that review. The National Security Guard went on to carry out two more raids of the *Sri Harmandir Sahib* (or 'Golden Temple' complex) in Amritsar in 1986 and 1988, as well as a number of notorious operations in Punjab villages. (See page 36)

- **How far did co-operation extend between MI5 and Indian intelligence?** - Significant co-operation between UK and Indian intelligence agencies developed after June 1984. According to MI5's official historian, the Security Service wanted to improve its agent running efforts inside Sikh diaspora groups in 1986. Given that many Sikhs detained by Indian security services were tortured, such co-operation and infiltration raises serious concerns that MI5 received information obtained through torture, or shared intelligence with Indian counter-parts who used torture. (See page 33)

- **Sale of military equipment to India in the 1980s was of paramount importance with the UK government turning a blind eye to human rights** - India was one of Britain's top three purchasers of military equipment from 1981-1990, at times buying more British weapons than Saudi Arabia.¹ As with the al-Yamamah deal, Thatcher personally intervened at the highest level to stop France winning key contracts with India. The UK Government was well aware of India's appalling human rights record and repressive actions by the state police and para military groups, however this was overlooked and ignored in the interests of progressing lucrative arms deals. (see page 11, 13, 18, 39)

- **Repressive measures against Sikhs were carried out in the UK to appease Indian government and secure arms deals** – The Indian government made astonishing requests of Britain. For example, the Indian government asked Britain, unsuccessfully, to intern leaders of Sikh *Gurdwaras* in the UK. In a meeting on 8 June 1984 a leading Indian foreign affairs official complained to the British High Commission about the inadequate security Britain was providing to his diplomatic staff in London, and implied British police should shoot dead Sikh protestors. However, other repressive measures were carried out to appease Indian government concerns, such as extensive Special Branch surveillance of peaceful Sikh protests, banning religious marches and demonstrations, measures to disrupt a Sikh Sports Tournament, an extradition treaty and deporting a Sikh activist who went on to be tortured in India. (See page 32, 40, 44, 55)

- **British trade with India from 1984 was dependent on the UK taking anti-Sikh measures to win favour with India** – Britain increased its intelligence cooperation with India against Sikhs to appease Indian politicians and diplomats. The scope of any proper inquiry must extend until at least Rajiv Gandhi's death in 1989, given the initial trade embargo when he came to power and Britain then winning major trade deals during his premiership. Heywood's claim that the decision to send an SAS adviser to Amritsar was not motivated by trade concerns seems fanciful. (See page 47, 50)

- **Misuse of the aid budget to subsidise defence sales to India** - Trade concerns dominate the British files on India from this period. This report reveals extensive records about efforts to persuade India to sign a contract with Westlands helicopters in exchange for millions of pounds in aid money. Although there was internal debate and division between Whitehall departments about the merits of using aid money to secure this contract, the British High Commissioner in New Delhi and Thatcher were consistently in favour of Westlands winning the contract. The Heywood Review hardly made any reference to the extent of these efforts to secure the Westlands helicopter deal, as well as the other military contracts that were in the pipeline. India was Britain's highest recipient of aid in 1984, receiving 24% of the aid budget. This was not done out of charity. The files are clear that aid was expected to pay dividends. (See page 18)

- **Appeasing the Indian government by applying pressure on the British media to suppress Sikh views** – This report highlights several incidences of appeasing India. In October 1983, the Foreign Office at a meeting with Thames Television dissuaded one of the programme's producers from including India in a documentary on abusive regimes. Following coverage of Indira Gandhi's assassination, the BBC Chairman responded to pressure from Thatcher, giving the BBC's assistant director-general "strict instructions" on "special clearance" needed "from him" on who could broadcast on the BBC. A week after the assassination, on 8 November, the BBC Director-General wrote a letter to the Indian High Commissioner, apologising for broadcasting an interview signalling that the free expression of Sikhs in the UK had been curtailed. (See page 42)

¹ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database, <http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>. The al-Yamamah arms deal moved Saudi Arabia ahead.

- **Serious conflicts of interest have increased censorship** – In this report we have pointed out several serious conflicts of interest involving key personnel with a vested interest in censoring the truth:

Bruce Cleghorn CMG was one of the ‘sensitivity reviewers’ in 2015 tasked with the censoring of documents, but he was a diplomat at the British High Commission in Delhi in 1983 and the South Asia Department in London in 1984. A week before the Amritsar massacre, Cleghorn wrote: “it would be dangerous” for the UK Government “to be identified” with “any attempt to storm the Golden Temple in Amritsar.” He was also named in the correspondence about possible SAS assistance to India immediately after the Amritsar massacre. (See page 8, 9)

Sir John Ramsden is a member of the Advisory Council on National Records and Archives, a panel that adjudicates on government censorship applications. Sir John was a key member of the FCO’s South Asia Department in 1984. He not only wrote the letter considering further SAS assistance for India immediately after the Amritsar massacre, but he also argued in favour of equipping Indian paramilitary forces, including rubber bullets. (See page 9, 27)

Although some Sikhs probably changed their view on Britain in January 2014 when Britain’s role emerged, the community’s response has been entirely peaceful. Despite numerous hurdles, the response from the Sikh community led by the Sikh Federation (UK) has been level-headed and sought to establish the truth of the full extent of the UK role in the 1980s in assisting India at home and abroad. The campaign over the last three and half years has had both a legal and political focus with the objective to create sufficient public pressure on the UK government.

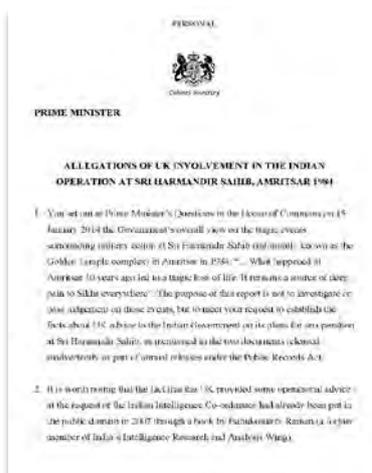
Despite much information being withheld, this report proves the in-house review was at best inadequate and at worst a cover up. The period intentionally selected for the Heywood review of December 1983 to June 1984 allowed it to overlook a considerable amount of context which clearly demonstrates the paramount importance of arms sales to Anglo-Indian relations in the build up to Operation Blue Star.

In February 2014, Heywood downplayed the situation and concluded that the “military advice was a one-off”, a position repeated by Number 10. This has now been shown to be untrue as the in-house review was not as rigorous or thorough as claimed, and Parliament and the wider public have been misled. The in-house review also stated no other form of UK military assistance, such as equipment or training, was given to the Indian authorities in relation to Operation Blue Star. This was repeated several times by the Foreign Secretary in Parliament. This has also been proved not to be true.

This report raises serious doubts about the adequacy and integrity of the Heywood report and shows Parliament was disturbingly misled in February 2014 as to the motivations and full extent of UK involvement. It is now all the more important for the current Prime Minister and Home Secretary to announce an independent public inquiry to get to the truth, however painful and damaging, of what happened in the 1980s. The inquiry will send a positive signal to the law abiding British Sikh community, the wider public and Parliamentarians so all can learn from it and ensure it never happens again.



David Cameron British PM at Amritsar 2013



Sir Jeremy Heywood Cabinet Secretary

1. Introduction: Searching for the Truth



Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) under siege June 1984



British PM Margaret Thatcher & Indian PM Indira Gandhi

1984 is a year Sikhs can never forget. It has been reported that up to 150,000 Indian army troops were sent to the northern Indian state of Punjab, the Sikh homeland, equipped with helicopter gunships and tanks.

A military assault, code-named Operation Blue Star began on 1st June 1984. The Sikhs' holiest site, the *Sri Harmandir Sahib* (often referred to as the 'Golden Temple' complex) in Amritsar was attacked by the Indian army on the false pretext of apprehending 'a handful of militants' lodged inside.²

Vijayanta tanks let loose a barrage of highly explosive shells, which destroyed the Akal Takht, the temporal seat of the Sikhs. The tanks used were exclusively built and supplied by Vickers-Armstrong Limited, a British engineering conglomerate. According to eye witness reports, seven to eight thousand pilgrims were massacred.

The Christian Science Monitor summed up the situation on 8 June 1984 writing: 'For five days the Punjab has been cut off from the rest of the world. There is a 24-hour curfew. All telephone and telex lines are cut. No foreigners are permitted entry and on Tuesday, all Indian journalists were expelled. There are no newspapers, no trains, no buses - not even a bullock cart can move. Orders to shoot on site were widely carried out. The whole of Punjab, with its 5,000 villages and 50 major cities, was turned into a concentration camp. The rules were what the Indian army and its political decision makers decided.'

The Indian army unleashed a terror unprecedented in post-independence India. Many other Sikh shrines were simultaneously attacked. Operation Blue Star was accompanied simultaneously by Operation Woodrose, a crackdown on Sikhs, mostly males aged 15-35, across the Punjab. Mary Anne Weaver writing in the Sunday Times on 22 July 1984 said: "thousands of people have disappeared from India's Punjab state since the raid on the Sikhs' Golden Temple seven weeks ago. In some villages men between 15 and 35 have been bound, blindfolded and taken away, the sources say. Their fate is unknown."

Months later, after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in revenge, sectarian mobs in Delhi and the Punjab were allowed to go on a genocidal rampage against Sikhs, killing almost three thousand in the capital alone. The alienation, persecution and extermination of Sikhs led many in the Punjab to resort to an armed struggle for independence from the Indian state, which carried on for a decade until brutal counter-insurgency policies, characterised by mass human rights violations including torture, disappearances and extra judicial killings brought it to an end.

There was understandable shock when in 2014 some British government files from 1984 were finally declassified under the 30 year rule and it emerged, in three highly incriminating letters, that in February 1984 Margaret Thatcher had sent an SAS special forces officer to Amritsar to advise the Indian authorities on how to forcibly remove Sikh dissidents from the sacred Sri Harmandir Sahib, just months before the Indian army launched its Operation Blue Star attack.

² Death Squad, The Anthropology of State Terror – Edited by Jeffrey A. Sluka, University of Pennsylvania Press, p77

Then Prime Minister David Cameron, who had less than a year earlier visited Amritsar and commemorated Britain's 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, sensed the gravity of the situation, with the news making international headlines. Faced with demands for a public inquiry from the Sikh community, Cameron told Parliament on 15 January 2014 that he was ordering Sir Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary and most senior civil servant, to conduct an internal review (not an inquiry) into the revelations.

Barely a fortnight later, on 3 February 2014, the Heywood Review was completed, having allegedly “searched around 200 files (in excess of 23,000 documents) held by all relevant Departments covering the handling of events in Amritsar” from the period December 1983 to June 1984. Ostensibly a comprehensive and exhaustive exercise, Heywood only saw fit to declassify five more letters. This was on the basis that “we do not release information relating to the intelligence agencies or special forces.” Given that this entire controversy centred on the activity of Britain's special forces, many felt that Heywood's restrictive approach was inappropriate. The public were expected to trust his conclusion that “The UK military officer's advice had limited impact in practice.”³

This whitewash underestimated the wider grievance and sense of betrayal among the Sikh community. Once it was revealed that a British special forces officer carried out a reconnaissance of their holiest site, there was a need to know what else was said about Sikhs in the files, if only to restore trust and allay suspicions that the Heywood Review was yet another cover up.

Furthermore, the human rights implications of this episode cuts across all communities. The British state has a duty to investigate any alleged involvement of its officials in war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture. The state's paramount obligation is to protect life, not to sacrifice the rights of one section of society for the sake of other interests.

As another result of the Amritsar disclosures, the Prime Minister ordered a review by Sir Alex Allan, former chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, into the release of government files to the National Archives. Sir Alex's report commented that the Amritsar papers were only released due to “a mistake, where the [sensitivity] reviewer did not spot references to the SAS.”⁴ His opinion echoed that of Sir Jeremy, who had described the original disclosures as “inadvertent”. In other words, the Sikh community and the public at large was never meant to have known that the SAS carried out military reconnaissance in Amritsar, months before a major massacre of pilgrims. Far from reassuring the community, these reviews deepened their sense of betrayal.

The effect of the Heywood/Allan Reviews was that government departments would have to be far more careful in the future about what they released to the National Archives, contrary to David Cameron's claim to be leading a 'transparency revolution' in open government. Sir Alex also found that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had a vast backlog of over half a million files and would fail to meet its declassification deadlines. This has delayed the Sikh Federation (UK) gaining access to many of the files from 1984, despite the government's transparency agenda which introduced legislation that promised a streamlined “20 year rule”.

The Sikh community, which had demanded a full public inquiry, and continues to do so, instead received an internal review by the Cabinet Office and a housekeeping exercise by Sir Alex, both of which demonstrated the inadequacies of the normal declassification processes for anyone seeking the truth after suffering an injustice involving Britain's special forces or intelligence agencies. After being kept in the dark for three decades, Sikhs would have to wait even longer, perhaps indefinitely, for more (invariably censored) files to arrive at the archives.

Despite these obstacles, the Sikh Federation (UK) has conducted its own investigation of the limited declassified material available at the National Archives. Our findings contradict the Heywood Review's conclusions and demonstrate the need for a full independent investigation, without any ministerial veto on national security grounds, to recover the truth. It is disappointing that Britain, the 'mother of parliaments', has maintained its opacity in respect of its relations with India, the 'world's largest democracy', about a period in which profoundly undemocratic policies were enacted on this minority community.

3 Allegations of UK involvement in the Indian operation at Sri Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar 1984, Jeremy Heywood, 3 February 2014
4 Records Review, Sir Alex Allan, August/November 2014 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/records-review-by-sir-alex-allan>

2. Censorship

Since the 2014 revelations, the Sikh Federation (UK) has tried to locate further information at the UK National Archives in Kew. Delays and pervasive censorship has made this an arduous task, leaving the impression that the UK government refuses to disclose its role in the Sikh community's suffering.

In reviewing additional files which were released to the Archives in early 2015, our researcher found that the Cabinet Office had withheld vital records, including a Joint Intelligence Committee file on India from 1979 to 1985. A freedom of information request for these files was first submitted on 30 December 2014 and took eight months to process and was refused on the grounds that (1) the material related to the intelligence agencies or special forces, and (2) disclosure would damage diplomatic relations with India.

A complaint to the Information Commissioner was submitted on 26 August 2015 and it took over a year to process and was eventually refused on 30 August 2016 on the same grounds. It is now the subject of an appeal to the Information Tribunal. The appeal was lodged on 26 September 2016 and a hearing was to take place on 12 April 2017. However, the Cabinet Office failed to file witness statements and the hearing was vacated. An attempt was made for a three-day hearing in October 2017 that has now been put back to March 2018. The unacceptable delays at every stage in the process suggests the Cabinet Office is reluctant to release relevant information.

Whilst the Public Records Act and Freedom of Information Act can be useful for achieving some transparency about overt government policy, these setbacks demonstrate that they are inadequate laws for obtaining the truth about Britain's covert involvement in India's repression of Sikhs. This is primarily due to their blanket exemptions against disclosing information relating to the SAS, MI5 and MI6.

The Foreign Office's files on India from 1983 were only made available to the public in late January 2016, 33 years on. They were quietly deposited at the National Archives in the middle of the month, separate from the normal New Year releases, with no press statement to announce their arrival. Once our researcher had managed to review the files, it became apparent that 30% of the records on India from 1983 remained withheld by the FCO in their entirety. This included files which appeared to be highly relevant, for example one missing document titled "Possible military training of Indian forces."⁵ Files that were released to the Archives contained considerable redactions.

One of the FCO's 'sensitivity reviewers' in 2015, Bruce Cleghorn CMG, who was tasked with censoring many of these old documents⁶, was a diplomat at the British High Commission in Delhi in 1983 and the South Asia Department in London in 1984.⁷ In many cases he had the task of censoring documents he wrote himself. A week before the Amritsar massacre, Cleghorn wrote that "it would be dangerous if HMG [Her Majesty's Government i.e. the UK] were to become identified, in the minds of Sikhs in the UK, with some more determined action by the Indian government, in particular any attempt to storm the Golden Temple in Amritsar."⁸ He was also named in the correspondence about possible SAS assistance to India after the Amritsar massacre. It is not inconceivable then that he could have a vested interest in censoring the truth.



Sir Alex Allen



National Archives Building Kew, London



National Archive released files storage

⁵ FCO 37/3232

⁶ For example, FCO 37/3681 contains a page which shows the file was sensitivity reviewed by Cleghorn on 11 June 2015.

⁷ For example FCO 37/3595 contains a letter dated 4 February 1983 from Bruce E Cleghorn of the British High Commission in New Delhi and then a letter dated 9 January 1984 from Mr Cleghorn at the South Asia Department

⁸ FCO 37/3606, F27, 31 May 1984

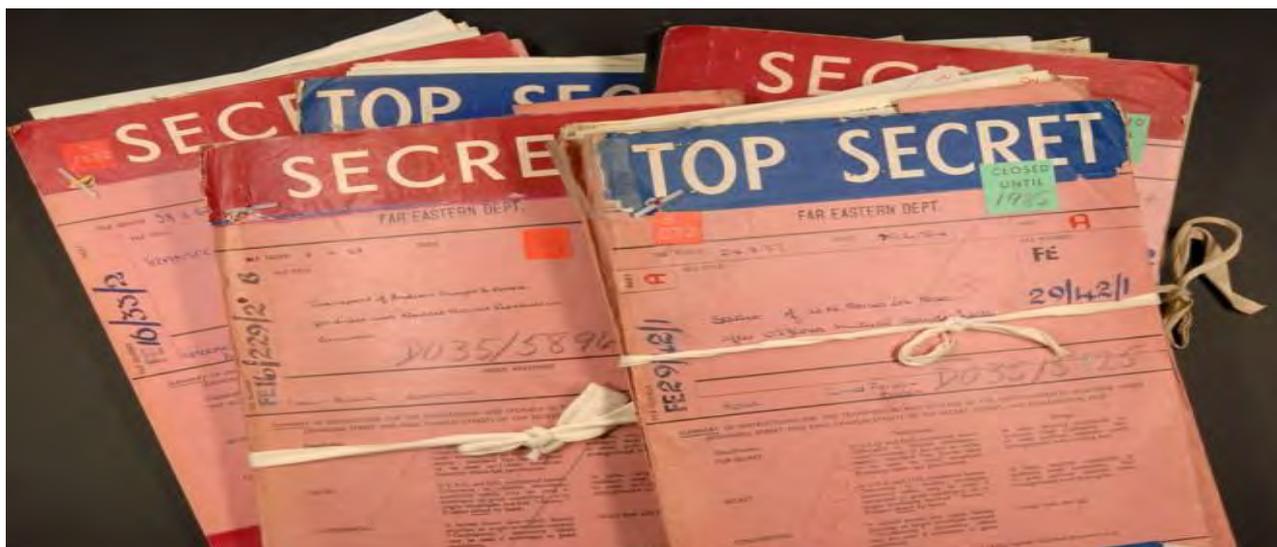
The censorship is unrelenting. The FCO files from 1984 were eventually released in late August 2016, again missing the 30-year deadline. The Foreign Office is withholding 33 files about India from the year of the Amritsar massacre, including key files such as "Security liaison between India and the UK".

Another 50 files contain redactions. This means that over half (54%) of the Foreign Office's 154 files about India from 1984 are censored in whole or in part.

Any Freedom of Information requests for documents withheld by the Archives are first considered by the Advisory Council on National Records and Archives to assess their suitability for disclosure to the public. This small panel, consisting of just over a dozen unpaid members, considered 278 FOI requests in 2015-2016, and concluded that the public interest lay in favour of disclosure in just 2 cases (less than 1%). Similarly, it considered 4,435 requests from the government to keep files secret, and only objected in 14 cases (again less than 1%).

In the face of these statistics, the Sikh Federation (UK) has decided not to ask the National Archives to declassify these files, as the odds seem rigged in the government's favour. More worryingly is that one member of the Advisory Council, Sir John Ramsden, was a key part of the FCO's South Asia Department in 1984. Sir John not only wrote the letter considering further SAS assistance for India after the Amritsar massacre, but he also argued in favour of equipping Indian para-military forces.

Fortunately, the government's censorship is not omnipotent. In the same way that human error led to the initial disclosures in January 2014, another slip up meant that vital evidence of further British involvement was released by mistake in August 2016. When the Sikh Federation (UK) asked to discuss their new finding with the Foreign Office, the department swiftly removed dozens of the files related to their activities in India three decades ago.



Bruce Cleghorn CMG



Sir John Ramsden FCO's South Asia Dept.

3. Whitehall views on Sikhs and Khalistan

There are many references in this report to Sikh 'extremists'. This was the terminology used by Thatcher's government to describe Sikhs who aspired to create *Khalistan*, an independent Sikh homeland in the Indian province of Punjab. The phrase 'extremist' is heavily loaded, especially in today's frenzied climate. Whitehall's use of this word to describe Sikh nationalists during the 1980s was myopic, and disregarded the fact, only fleetingly referred to in the declassified files, that "Sikhs briefly possessed their own kingdom in the 19th century until they were defeated by the British in 1849."

British colonial era promises to restore the Sikh Kingdom never materialised, and the partition of India in 1947 tore the Punjab apart, resulting in mass migration with millions fleeing. Many settled in the UK, the former metropole. For Sikhs, whose warriors had fought loyally for the British Empire in both world wars as well as playing a disproportionately active role in India's independence movements, they had lost out in the post-war order. A minority in independent India, they became a target for increasingly sectarian policies. And as a minority in Britain, they faced state discrimination and racist attacks from groups such as the National Front, epitomised by the 1979 Southall Riots in west London.

By 1984, feelings of marginalisation were acute. The British High Commission in New Delhi observed that, "Since Independence this proud, hard working and successful religious minority have felt increasingly frustrated politically, discriminated against economically and insecure in their religion." Whilst British diplomats dismissed the idea of Sikhs suffering political persecution, they said that "Feelings of economic discrimination are more justified," as the Green Revolution of the 1960s/70s in Punjab had plateaued. They observed that:

*"Major industrial investment by the Centre [New Delhi], which might compensate for this, has not been flowing into Punjab as it has in other states. Most Sikhs feel strongly therefore that they put more into India than they get out of it. Feelings of religious insecurity are also understandable. The Sikh religion is young, militant and dynamic. But many Sikhs think their faith is under threat. They see it weakened by the modern materialism their own economic success has generated. They thus fear that over time it will be absorbed back into amorphous Hinduism. They feel unjustly constrained by the Hindu majority of 'secular' India from taking steps to prevent this."*⁹

The idea of greater autonomy was anathema to Indira Gandhi, who wanted to maintain India's unity and central control of the country. Whitehall knew that under her premiership, "The basic Sikh demand that they should rule their own corner will remain unacceptable".¹⁰ Added to the equation was the fact, as identified by the US State Department, that Mrs Gandhi had shifted her alliance away from the Soviet Union by the 1980s, such that Western European countries like Britain and France stood to win billions of pounds worth of arms deals with India.



Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara Southall

When Thatcher came to power, the month after the Southall riots, Whitehall did not have a favourable approach to the Sikh diaspora or Sikh national aspirations. Files declassified by the Irish government showed that Thatcher herself viewed British Sikhs with suspicion. When discussing reconciliation proposals for the Catholic community in Northern Ireland with the *Taoiseach* (Irish premier) in November 1984, Thatcher remarked, "If these things were done, the next question would be what comes next? Were the Sikhs in Southall to be allowed to fly their own flag?"¹¹

This derogatory attitude towards Sikhs is common in the Whitehall files from that era, and it is hard to find much sympathy among civil servants or ministers for the Sikh cause. The prejudice was overt at times, with for example the FCO's South Asia Department commenting that Sikhs, "being somewhat aggressive by nature, are inclined to resort to violence in prosecution of their grievances. Although the Khalistan movement has at present very little

9 FCO 37/3584, F108, 22 May 1984

10 FCO 37/3584, F108, 22 May 1984

11 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/dec/27/margaret-thatcher-irish-talks-archives>

support in India, it has enormous potential for mischief and clearly has the Indian Government worried.”¹²

The British government, committed to India's territorial integrity, had little patience for independence movements in South Asia. This attitude made the British authorities much more willing to co-operate with Indian security agencies against Sikh activists in the Punjab and in the diaspora.

Mrs Gandhi kept her grip on the Punjab by scrapping civil liberties. The Special Powers Act of 1983 gave Indian security forces in Punjab the power to search premises and arrest people without a warrant, to shoot to kill suspected terrorists, and granted prosecutorial immunity to any action taken pursuant to the Act. A British diplomat commented that “Punjab looks more and more like a long-running tragedy, on the Basque or Northern Irish pattern.”¹³ UK files note that 4,500 people were apprehended under the Act by July 1984.¹⁴

Another law of note was the Terrorist Affected Areas (Special Courts) Act of 1984, commonly known as TADA, which provided for special *in camera* courts that could conceal the identity of witnesses. A defendant charged with “waging war” under TADA, had the burden of proving his innocence. The British High Commission summarised this new law as, “In a word, guilty until proved innocent.”¹⁵

British officials were “surprised” by this new law and said it “appears to mean that anyone arrested in the immediate whereabouts of a violent incident involving the use of firearms or explosives against the security forces will be assumed guilty unless able to prove their innocence.”¹⁶ One noted that “It seems to have worrying implications for the wider issue of civil liberties in India over the long term”.

The British High Commission added that “This is by no means the only unsatisfactory feature ... almost any expression of opposition to the Government could conceivably be included.” It said that “the definition of a terrorist is very broad ... Strikes and rail or road blockades – favourite methods of peaceful protest here – could all fall within this definition.” And in an ominous reference to Indira Gandhi's disastrous state of emergency during the 1970s, they commented that, “Mrs Gandhi may never make the mistake of declaring an Emergency again but it is probably fair to say that the powers at her disposal do not fall far short of those she had in the Emergency.”¹⁷

The Sikhs led the opposition to the Emergency in the 1970s from the Akal Takht Sahib offering daily voluntary arrests. According to Amnesty International, 140,000 people were detained without trial during Gandhi's Emergency, nearly 40,000 Sikhs courted arrest. Sikhs comprised only 2% of the population but 29% of the political prisoners. Indira Gandhi never forgave the Sikhs for their incessant and active opposition to the Emergency.

Britain never tried to dissuade Mrs Gandhi from using her new powers, and sometimes it seemed that Sikh lives simply did not matter in Whitehall. There is no Foreign Office report at the Archives about the number of civilians who died during Operation Blue Star, only details of Indian army casualties and those of Sikh 'militants'. Absent are the eye witness accounts which estimated that 7,000 to 8,000 unarmed Sikh and non-Sikh pilgrims also perished, when they were trapped by troops inside the *Sri Harmandir Sahib* during the four-day attack, which coincided with one of the most celebrated religious holidays in the Sikh calendar (the martyrdom anniversary of the fifth Sikh Guru, who built the *Sri Harmandir Sahib*).¹⁸

Operation Blue Star was accompanied simultaneously by Operation Woodrose, a crackdown on Sikhs, mostly males aged 15-35, across the Punjab. The Foreign Office commented that, “There are signs that mopping-up operations against suspected Sikh terrorists are being conducted with considerable insensitivity towards Sikh population as a whole. New system of special Courts to try terrorist related offences in secret has significantly strengthened Central Government's array of powers to crack down in Punjab virtually without restraint.”¹⁹

12 FCO 37/3595, 5 March 1982

13 FCO 37/3584, F109, 29 May 1984

14 FCO 37/3610, F218, 9 July 1984

15 FCO 37/3585, F149, 3 August 1984

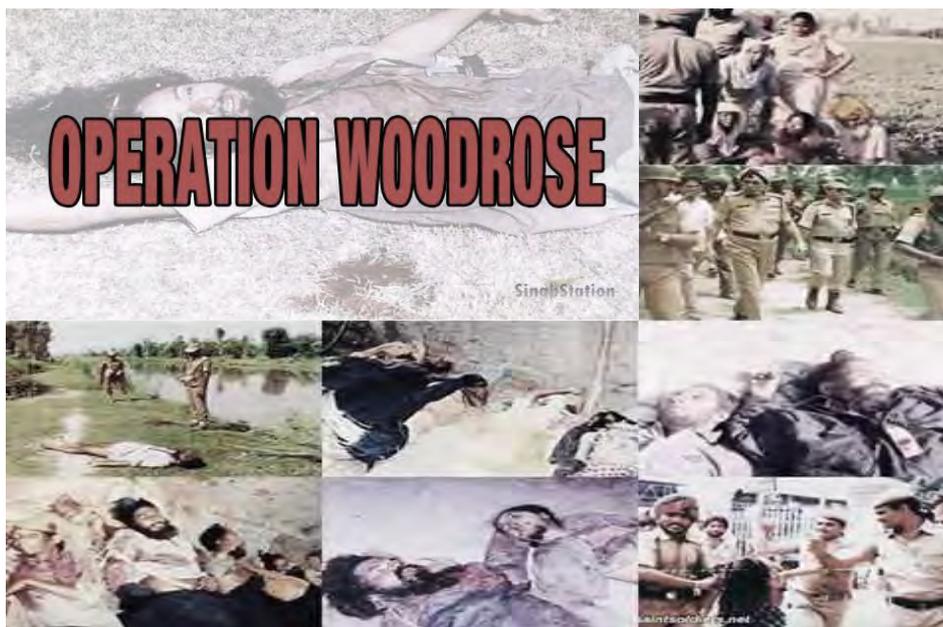
16 FCO 37/3585, F146, 24 July 84

17 FCO 37/3585, F149, 3 August 1984

18 Silva, Romesh, Jasmine Marwaha & Jeff Klingner, “Violent Deaths and Enforced Disappearances During the Counterinsurgency in Punjab, India: A Preliminary Quantitative Analysis” A Joint Report by Benetech's Human Rights Data Analysis Group & Ensaaf, Inc. January, 2009. Available online at <http://www.hrdag.org/about/india-punjab.shtml> and at http://www.ensaaf.org/reports/descriptive_analysis_p10

19 FCO 37/3613, F274, 24 July 1984, Ramsden to SCU/Hilary

There are British reports on Sikh civilian deaths during the Delhi pogroms, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination, where they put the death toll at over a thousand, with 20,000 people displaced into relief camps. The failure of Indian security forces to stop the pogroms is mentioned briefly in the British files, with a passing comment on the "initial inaction of the police and paramilitary forces in the face of mobs."²⁰ It is not clear how much Whitehall acknowledged that Indian government figures had orchestrated the violence, partly because of the extent of censorship of the files. For example, comments like this: "The political nature of the organisation behind some of the violence [one line redacted] makes the Sikhs feel all the more insecure."²¹ Still, the UK government had a good idea of what was taking place. One telex noted that "We have received eye witness reports of Sikhs being dragged from a Jaipur-Delhi train then beaten up or murdered."²² Yet Whitehall remarked, with stark disregard for Sikh suffering, that "Number of deaths in inter-communal violence (1,000 plus) not high by Indian standards".²³ This body count was an under estimate, and the human rights group Ensaaf, puts the death toll at nearly 3,000 deaths just in the capital:



Notorious operation launched to target Sikh males aged 15-35 across villages in Punjab

"[S]enior politicians from the ruling Congress Party and police officers orchestrated pogroms of Sikhs in various cities across India, killing at least 2,733 Sikhs in Delhi alone. Gangs of assailants burned Sikhs alive, gang-raped Sikh women, and destroyed Gurdwaras and other Sikh-owned properties, among other crimes."²⁴

Operation Blue Star in June 1984 marked the start of a decade-long counterinsurgency campaign against Sikhs, in which Indian security forces systematically violated human rights. The British High Commission remarked that, "The longer the army are involved in this way the deeper is likely to be the resentment of the Sikh community against what may come to be seen as an army of occupation."²⁵ There was concern in Whitehall about "Mrs Gandhi's increasing tendency to confront opposition forces with dubious means".²⁶ By August 1984, UK diplomats warned that "stories which are emerging of, in particular, army and para-military excesses and ill-discipline. ... it is now accepted that the 'healing touch' [promised by Mrs Gandhi] was little but rhetoric".²⁷ According to Human Rights Watch and Ensaaf:

"From 1984 to 1995 the Indian government ordered counterinsurgency operations that led to the arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial execution, and enforced disappearance of thousands of Sikhs. Police abducted young Sikh men on suspicion that they were involved in the militancy, often in the presence of

20 FCO 37/3621

21 FCO 37/3621, F31, 6 December 1984

22 FCO 37/3621, Aftermath of assassination of Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India.

23 FCO 37/3621

24 Ensaaf 2009, p 11

25 FCO 37/3607, F101, 11 June 1984.

26 FCO 37/3613, F274, 24 July 1984

27 FCO 37/3613, F292, 3 August 1984

witnesses, yet later denied having them in custody. Most of the victims of such enforced disappearances are believed to have been killed. To hide the evidence of their crimes, security forces secretly disposed of the bodies, usually by cremating them. When the government was questioned about “disappeared” youth in Punjab, it often claimed that they had gone abroad to Western countries.

“Special counterinsurgency laws, and a system of rewards and incentives for police to capture and kill militants, led to an increase in 'disappearances' and extrajudicial executions of civilians and militants alike. In 1994, Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights described the government’s operations as 'the most extreme example of a policy in which the end appeared to justify any and all means, including torture and murder'.”²⁸

Precise body counts from this emergency period are hard to obtain. However, the Committee for Coordination on Disappearances in Punjab (CCDP) recorded 1,691 unique enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and “illegal cremations”. 89% of their accounts came from either the parent, spouse, sibling, or child of the deceased.²⁹

The United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID) repeatedly warned the Government of India about enforced disappearances and said in 1994 that “under-reported enforced disappearances may be due to citizens’ fear of reprisals for exposing human rights violations”.³⁰ India's official National Human Rights Commission acknowledged 2,059 “illegal cremations” during the emergency period, referring to a practice whereby police secretly disposed of the bodies of Sikhs they had extra-judicially killed.³¹ Reports in the Tribune, a major English-language newspaper in Punjab, provide reference to 17,582 unique victims of the conflict from 1988 to 1995.³²

Torture was widespread, as recorded by the UK's Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture:

“Between November 1991 and March 1999, Dr Forrest, former president of the British Association of Paediatric Surgeons, examined 95 Sikh males at the Medical Foundation's north London treatment centre. All had been held in detention at some period between 1978 and 1998, one of them 35 times. Only two gave the impression that they were embroidering the truth and no medical report was written for them.

“In a report entitled Lives Under Threat: a study of Sikhs coming to the UK from the Punjab, Dr Forrest says that of the others, all reported severe ill treatment, with 82 of them stating that on one or more occasions they had been knocked unconscious with a variety of weapons, including fists, boots, truncheons, lathis (long stout bamboo canes) and leather belts with metal buckles.

“In addition, 57 of them reported being suspended by the wrists, ankles, or hair and then beaten. Thirty-five were given electric shocks, either by a magneto or from a mains socket, with one man forced to urinate into an electric fire. Fourteen suffered burns, and seven had their nails pulled out by pliers.

“Forty eight of the men also reported suffering a form of torture peculiar to India, the cheera (“tearing” in Punjabi) in which the victims’ legs are forced strongly apart, often to 180 degrees. Two had severe scarring in the groin which could only have been caused by excessive stretching of the skin.

“And 69 men also reported suffering another Indian torture, ghotna, in which a thick wooden pestle used in the Punjab to grind spices, was slowly rolled down their thighs or calves with a policeman sitting on it, or placed behind the knees with the legs then flexed over it.”³³

This torture had a logic. To break people, and turn them to the Indian government's side. It was part of a counter-insurgency strategy aimed at wiping out Sikh national aspirations. Whitehall commented that “Instead of the

28 Human Rights Watch and Ensaaf, *Protecting the Killers, a policy of impunity in Punjab, India*, 2007 p 2

29 Ensaaf 2009, p 20

30 Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, E/CN.4/1995/36, December 21, 1994, cited in HRW/Ensaaf 2009 p 12

31 Ensaaf 2009, p 6

32 Ensaaf 2009

33 <https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/news-blogs/81>

promised 'healing touch' the Indian government has been trying to split the Sikh movement."³⁴ A key tactic for defeating the resistance in Punjab was the infiltration of Sikh militant groups. Sikh captives who were turned to the government's side were known as 'cats', an acronym for Covert Apprehension Techniques. They were militants used against other militants by the security forces.

Indian police chiefs from that period have gone on the record revealing their tactics. The Tribune newspaper said in 2006 that the Director-General of Punjab Police claimed "militants were won over by the police and then used in counter-insurgency operations. These were tactics used in extraordinary situations and they could not just go by the rule-book in such a scenario."³⁵

These methods bear a striking similarity to the 'counter-gangs' tactic used by British forces in Kenya during the 1950s to suppress the 'Mau Mau' uprising. Torture was widespread in this conflict, often with the intention of turning captured rebels so they would go back into the bush and infiltrate or eliminate their former comrades. Kenyan victims of this policy have received substantial compensation from the British government in recent years. On the 6th June 2013, Foreign Secretary William Hague had to admit to the House of Commons what Britain's treatment of the Mau Mau entailed:

"Emergency regulations were introduced: political organisations were banned; prohibited areas were created and provisions for detention without trial were enacted. The colonial authorities made unprecedented use of capital punishment and sanctioned harsh prison so-called 'rehabilitation' regimes. Many of those detained were never tried and the links of many with the Mau Mau were never proven...The British Government recognises that Kenyans were subject to torture and other forms of ill treatment at the hands of the colonial administration."

It is troubling then that Britain's defence attaché in India from 1983 to 1986 was a veteran of the Kenyan Emergency. Brigadier JR Cornell CBE had been a captain in the Rifle Brigades in Kenya from 1954 to 1956, where he served as an intelligence officer. Another captain in the Rifle Brigades at that time was a young Frank Kitson, who received the Military Cross "in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in Kenya, during the period 21st April to 20th October, 1954". Kitson later wrote a book about his experience of British counter-insurgency strategy in Kenya, titled *Gangs and Counter-Gangs*, and became the British army's most authoritative figure on counter-insurgency. It is significant then that both Kitson and Cornell worked in intelligence capacities against the Mau Mau in 1954. Both men had been transferred to Malaya and Singapore by 1957, where another anti-colonial uprising was being violently put down with similar means.

It is possible that Cornell could have exported this counter-insurgency experience to India while he was Defence Attaché in Delhi during the 1980s. Records at the National Archives show that in 1984, Cornell was in contact with Indian government para-military forces, units which were heavily involved in counter-insurgency operations in the Punjab. Indeed, he was keen to sell them British 'internal security' equipment. Another concern is that from 1975 to 1977, Cornell was chief of staff at the Ulster Defence Regiment's (UDR) headquarters in Armagh. These years marked the peak of UDR collusion with loyalist para-military groups against Catholic civilians, a phenomenon that has been compared to Kitson's 'counter-gangs' in Kenya. UDR members, when off-duty, teamed up with loyalist gangs to carry out bombings and assassinations of nationalists. The Glenanne Gang's massacre of the Miami Showband in 1975 being a case in point. Throughout the Troubles, "between 5 and 15% of the UDR were also members of loyalist organisations supplying stolen weapons, intelligence and finance to killers", the Pat Finucane Centre has found.³⁶ There are questions then to be asked about what advice Cornell gave to India while he was Britain's defence attaché. At the very least, he would have been familiar with some of the more controversial counter-insurgency tactics that Indian security forces were using against Sikhs.

In Ireland and Kenya at those times, the British government had a direct stake in maintaining order, even if it was done at the expense of the law. Similarly, in post-colonial India, Britain had major bi-lateral interests that Sikh activists were seen to threaten. Whitehall believed that lucrative trade deals with India could be lost if Britain did not do enough to curtail Sikh campaigners in the UK. It is worth looking at the FCO files from 1983 and earlier to set the scene, as the Heywood Review only examined from December 1983 to the end of June 1984.

34 FCO 37/3585, F167, September 1984

35 Tribune, Punjab Police Admits Using "Cats" (Militants to Counter Militants), 20 Feb 2006

36 Pat Finucane Centre, *The hidden history of the UDR: the secret files revealed*, August 2014, p3

From these papers, it becomes apparent that the slightest mention of Sikh grievances in the UK press or parliament was enough to trigger a furious response from Indian officials. The focus of India's concerns was Punjab's former finance minister Dr Jagjit Singh Chauhan, who had been resident in the UK since 1971. The immigration officer who processed his arrival into the UK commented that "His political interests are being reported to Box 500 [MI5] by the Special Branch."³⁷ Dr Chauhan was a prominent proponent of Khalistan.



Khalistan political activist Dr Jagjit Singh Chauhan

In the early 1980s, the Indian government was concerned about Dr Chauhan's travels to and from the UK, and asked the Home Office not to renew his travel document. This was not possible, and the Foreign Office commented that "we are only too conscious of the fact that we might face an indefensible case before the European Commission on Human Rights. As far as we know Chauhan's activities in the UK have been peaceful and we cannot prevent them unless he breaches UK law."³⁸

Still, his immigration movements were monitored and noted by the British authorities. When he appeared on British television in early 1983, it triggered a protest by Indian politicians. The Foreign Office warned its staff in Delhi that, "It is important for us and the Home Office to be alive to Indian opinion on this potentially embarrassing issue."³⁹

Senior Indian politicians were convinced that Britain covertly supported Khalistan activists, by allowing people such as Dr Chauhan to reside in the UK. In June 1983, Kamal Nath, a Congress party MP, voiced these concerns at a London lunch meeting with FCO staff, in which he claimed to have visited Britain just to monitor Sikh activists.⁴⁰ Although the Foreign Office thought his concerns were unfounded, they were alarmed because Mr Nath was "well in with Mrs Gandhi and Rajiv" and would return to India to propagate his view among powerful people. Kamal Nath was indicted by the Nanavati Commission on allegations that he was involved in the 1984 genocidal attacks. Testimonies stated Nath led an armed mob that attacked and demolished a Gurdwara in Rakab Ganj. Sikhs were burned alive during the attack.

As early as August 1983, Whitehall realised that Delhi's concerns over Sikh activists, however baseless, could start to jeopardise trade deals, after India's top diplomat, MK Rasgotra, brought up the issue of Khalistan at a meeting with Ray Whitney MP, who was then an FCO minister. Although it was not a problem at that point, Rasgotra "clearly implied that it could become one if nothing were done about it at the British end." The Foreign Office was unsettled, and commented that: "However baseless Indian suspicions might be, they now seem to be a more serious factor which we shall have to take into account. Rasgotra was presumably acting on political instructions, perhaps even from Mrs Gandhi".⁴¹

British diplomats in Delhi were asked for their take on the situation. They responded, "So far, it has not seriously affected our bilateral relations, but if there is any risk that it could start to sour the atmosphere we would need to consider how we might defuse it."⁴² Diplomatic staff warned London that Rasgotra's concerns about Khalistan activists reflected the attitudes of "the high command or, in effect, Mrs Gandhi. We therefore entirely agree that we need to take it seriously and do what we can to ensure it does not become a bilateral issue."⁴³ By September 1983, Ministers were briefed on the risk Sikh activists posed to trade, with Lady Young notified that "Rasgotra's suggestion, though preposterous, reflects Mrs Gandhi's genuinely held concerns about foreign support for extremist opposition groups in India. We should therefore take it seriously."⁴⁴

37 FCO 37/3595, 10 December 1971

38 FCO 37/3595, 12 Jan 1982

39 FCO 37/3188, Dal Khalsa and Khalistan, folio 5, 27 April 1983

40 FCO 37/3188, Dal Khalsa and Khalistan, folio 7, 14 June 1983

41 FCO 37/3188, Dal Khalsa and Khalistan, folio 11, 19 August 1983

42 FCO 37/3188, Dal Khalsa and Khalistan, folio 11, 19 August 1983

43 FCO 37/3188, Dal Khalsa and Khalistan, folio 13, 2 September 1983

44 FCO 37/3188, Dal Khalsa and Khalistan, folio 14, September 1983



Kamal Nath, Senior Congress Party MP



MK Rasgotra Indian diplomat

Running parallel to these concerns about Sikhs 'souring the atmosphere' are a flurry of reports about the escalating protests in Punjab. There are frequent redactions to the recipient list of these telegrams, strongly suggesting that copies were sent to UK intelligence agencies. Many of the memos were sent to the Home Office, Cabinet Office and Ministry of Defence, showing that all these departments were monitoring Sikh unrest in India. By September 1983, Margaret Thatcher knew that Indira Gandhi faced problems in the Punjab. Minutes from a meeting between the two leaders show that, "Mrs Gandhi appeared to be concerned about tension in the Punjab where she had held three large political meetings".⁴⁵

Although the British government was well aware of Sikh grievances, this did not deter Whitehall's appeasement of the Indian central government in order to secure trade deals. British diplomats even approved of Indira Gandhi's handling of Sikh unrest, with one remarking that, "It is apparent that Mrs Gandhi and the Central Government have gone on the offensive on the Punjab issue ... I give the Government high marks for their handling of Punjab in these recent weeks".⁴⁶ The FCO's disdain for demands for greater autonomy for Sikhs is plain to see in this memo from the British High Commissioner, in which he dismisses their grievances as 'special pleading':

"In Punjab the Sikhs, who comprise just over half the state's population, have claimed that they are discriminated against religiously and economically. In fact, Sikhs are one of the wealthiest and most respected communities in India and there is little evidence to back up their claim, which is primarily intended to whip up popular support and restore their main political party to power in the state. Mrs Gandhi's government has conceded most of their religious demands but their economic and political claims amount to special pleading which, if granted without general agreement, would be at the expense of other communities."⁴⁷

The scale of repression in Punjab at the time of that remark is staggering, and should confirm that there was much more motivating these demonstrators than 'special pleading'. A civil disobedience campaign (Dharam Yodh Morcha) led by the Sikh political party Akali Dal in 1982 had resulted in 36,737 arrests in 88 days of protests, according to an Amnesty International clipping amongst the FCO files. The crackdown continued into 1983, with India's police pre-emptively arresting 1,200 Akali Dal activists in the days before a protest was due to be held. Some activists still managed to stage a road block, and 20 people were killed. The British High Commission commented that: "As so often happens in the Punjab, confrontations between the police and demonstrators in a number of different places ended in violence with tear gas being used and shooting by both demonstrators and police."⁴⁸

There are some signs that British diplomats understood the extent of Sikh grievances, and yet this would not stop Margaret Thatcher from later co-operating in an attack on their faith's holiest site. One British diplomat tried to "emphasise how deeply felt the Sikh sense of grievance is... the Sikhs are becoming more and more disenchanted, feeling that the Central Government are not prepared to listen to their complaints."⁴⁹ By April 1983, some Sikhs were allegedly using the *Sri Harmandir Sahib* as a hide out from the police, taking advantage of its status as a sanctuary that was off limits to law enforcement officers.

45 FCO 37/3184, Briefs on India, folio 50, 3 October 1983
46 FCO 37/3179, Internal political situation in India, folio 81, 23 March 1983
47 FCO 37/3266, India: Human Rights, Part A, Folio 23, 8 September 1983
48 FCO 37/3179, Internal political situation in India, folio 79, 5 April 1983
49 FCO 37/3179, Internal political situation in India, folio 88, 8 April 1983



*Sir Robert Wade-Gery
British High Commissioner*

Ironically, the British High Commissioner Sir Robert Wade-Gery was well aware that any attempt to force entry into the holy site would have disastrous consequences. "Any attempt by the government to use force to enter the Golden Temple precincts is likely to meet defiant resistance from the Akali Dal and to inflame Sikh opinion generally," he warned his bosses in London. "At least one normally sober Sikh commentator, Khushwant Singh, has warned that there could be a blood bath if the police were sent into the Golden Temple at this stage."⁵⁰ And yet within a year of this warning of a "blood bath", the British Prime Minister had sent a special forces officer to advise the Indian army on how to attack the holy site.

The British High Commissioner should have known the consequences. Indeed, he had been warned: "one Sikh journalist said to me yesterday 'it will be another Jallianwala Bagh. It took 28 years after that for India to win its independence; if the police go into the Golden Temple, there will be Khalistan in 10 years'".⁵¹ This reference to the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre of Sikh protesters in Amritsar by British imperial troops was a prophetic warning of what lay ahead.

There was also a mounting awareness that what happened in the Punjab would reverberate outside of India as well. By May 1983, British diplomats noted that, "The Indian government in the Khalistan context has specifically stated that it has raised the activities of the Khalistan movement with the UK authorities." Officials feared that Dr Chauhan's residency in the UK could give substance to allegations of UK support for Khalistan. "We will always be liable to have a finger pointed at us," the FCO complained.⁵² However, much of this important commentary on the internal situation in India finishes in June 1983, a year before the 1984 massacre, with the next two volumes of the file series being withheld by the Foreign Office.⁵³

What is clear, however, is that Whitehall had a dismissive attitude towards human rights abuses by Indian authorities. The FCO told Foreign Office minister Malcolm Rifkind's private secretary that, "There is widespread evidence, not all of it circumstantial, that torture by the police does occur. Police brutality in the treatment of prisoners held in custody is widespread, particularly in North India."⁵⁴ However, the FCO had no intention of speaking out against the widespread brutality of India's police, commenting starkly that "Deaths of people in police custody have undoubtedly occurred. ... HMG [Her Majesty's government] has made no representations to the Government of India. These events are an internal matter for the Government of India and one in which HMG has no official standing."⁵⁵

Sometimes however, the UK Foreign Office appeared to act as a PR agency for the Indian government. At a meeting with Thames Television, a production company that was making a documentary on abusive regimes, the FCO hoped to dissuade one of the programme's producers from including India in the show: "We tried discreetly to head her away from India".⁵⁶

Whitehall was willing to give India's security forces the benefit of the doubt and look the other way. In preparation for a Parliamentary question, an FCO briefing said that: "We have taken the line that in Assam and Punjab the Indian government continue to do all in their power to end the communal violence and that we do not believe an expression of our concern would in these circumstances be helpful. Some letters ... have alleged general abuses of human rights by the Indian security forces in their handling of unrest in these two Indian states. Our view is that any cases are not condoned by the Indian government, and occur only in the heat of the moment."⁵⁷

50 FCO 37/3179, Internal political situation in India, folio 94, 29 April 1983
51 FCO 37/3179, Internal political situation in India, folio 97, 29 April 1983
52 FCO 37/3179, Internal political situation in India, folio 103, 12 May 1983
53 FCO 37/3180 and FCO 37/3181
54 FCO 37/3266, India: Human Rights, Part A, Folio 4, 22 March 1983
55 FCO 37/3266, India: Human Rights, Part A, Folio 5, 23 March 1983
56 FCO 37/3266, India: Human Rights, Part B, Folio 30, 10 October 1983
57 FCO 37/3266, India: Human Rights, Part A, Folio 8, 29 April 1983

4. 1983 - UK arms sales to India at risk from the 'Sikh Issue'

Trade concerns dominate the British files on India from this period, to the extent that the events of June 1984 cannot be understood without reviewing UK efforts to export civil and military goods. Britain's Overseas Development Administration (ODA), then part of the Foreign Office, has extensive records about its efforts to persuade India to sign a contract with Westlands helicopters in exchange for millions of pounds in aid money. India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) was looking for commercial helicopters to service offshore oil platforms. The files show that parts of Whitehall, including Thatcher herself, had serious concerns that a French company would win this commercial helicopter contract instead of Britain's Westlands. Crucially, these concerns reached a crescendo around the time that the SAS advisor was sent to Amritsar (February 1984).

In his review, Sir Jeremy Heywood claimed that "there is no record linking the provision of UK military advice to the discussion of potential defence or helicopter sales; or to any other policy or commercial issue." He ruled it out even further, stating that, "The scope for such a linkage is not suggested in any submission to, or comment from, a UK Minister or official." He boldly concluded that "In sum, there is no evidence that the UK, at any level, attempted to use the fact that military advice had been given on request to advance any commercial objective."

Whilst to some degree one has to take Heywood at his word (because so much of the relevant files are still classified), it is worth setting out in detail what the available files actually show about those commercial and defence sales agreements. This way the public can reach its own view as to the importance that lucrative trade deals had on Thatcher's decision to send an SAS officer to Amritsar and any other covert anti-Sikh measures that she may have authorised.

From the outset, the FCO worked closely with Westlands to help the company win the helicopter contract with India. Although there was internal debate and division between Whitehall departments about the merits of using aid money to secure this contract, the British High Commissioner in New Delhi and Thatcher were consistently in favour of Westlands winning the contract. As early as April 1982, Westlands thanked the British High Commission (BHC) in New Delhi for its "invaluable assistance" in selecting a sales consultant for pursuing this deal.⁵⁸ Months later, the BHC told Whitehall that the helicopter sale to ONGC "would constitute a significant and visible entry into a sector which we would like to see UK firms take more interest."⁵⁹

The Westlands W30 contract was not the only major Anglo-Indian trade deal being promoted in 1983, at a time of escalating Sikh unrest. Lucrative military sales of Sea King helicopters and Sea Eagle missile to the Indian Navy were also on the table. Foreign Office minister Lady Young was told by her department that in the event of any difficulties, "These contracts are of crucial concern to the aerospace industry and considerable pressure can be expected to be exerted on Whitehall by companies to meet the Indian objections." The Sea King deal went ahead later in 1983, with personal support from Margaret Thatcher.⁶⁰

Britain's main rival for these trade deals was France. A Whitehall civil servant wrote that, "it seems to me that it can only be to our advantage to have something as visible as helicopters flying around to dent somewhat the current impression of French supremacy. Westlands are up against the French and the Americans, and have so far been running very much third."⁶¹ In April 1983, the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) procurement division went on a ten day visit to India and filed a detailed report, which Thatcher read.⁶² The MOD noted that "The central aim must be to convince the Indians that we are serious in wanting to work with them". The amount of money at stake was vast: "The Indian MOD will shortly be taking decisions on a large number of equipment programmes worth in all about £1 Billion." It was against this backdrop that Thatcher had meetings with India's foreign and defence ministers, as well as the PM Indira Gandhi, later that year.

Whitehall was determined to impress upon Indian officials its willingness to sell them weapons. The FCO's top civil servant assured Pratap Kishen Kaul, a key Indian figure responsible for major defence sales negotiations that, "the growing links between India and Britain in the defence field enjoy firm political backing and that we can be

58 OD 27/414, Aid for Westlands helicopters, April 1982 – August 1983. Letter dated 21 April 1982, page 2 of pdf

59 OD 27/414, Aid for Westlands helicopters, April 1982 – August 1983. Letter dated 27 August 1982, page 15 of pdf

60 It is interesting to note, in light of the Operation Sundown allegations that the SAS officer advised a helicopter borne raid on the Sri Harmandir Sahib, that Sea King was "equipped for parachuting and abseiling", and that the SAS have used Sea King helicopters for insertion on special forces operations.

61 OD 27/414, Aid for Westlands helicopters, April 1982 – August 1983. Letter dated 1 March 1983, page 24 of pdf

62 PREM 19/1273 UK/India relations part 3, November 1982 – February 1984. Letter dated 28 April 1983 pages 5-11 of pdf

regarded as a reliable and sympathetic supplier of defence equipment.”⁶³ Kaul visited London twice in the space of two months. For his second visit in May 1983, Westlands flew Kaul from London to their factory in Yeovil on a W30 helicopter in VIP mode, to promote the deal. The MOD arranged for Kaul to meet the Chief of the Defence Staff, the First Sea Lord and the Air Chief Marshal who was also chief of defence procurement.



Narasimha Rao India's Minister of External Affairs

In August 1983, Downing Street made arrangements for India's Minister of External Affairs, Narasimha Rao, to visit London in November 1983. The Indian defence minister, Mr Venkataraman, was also scheduled to visit the UK in November. The FCO told Downing Street that:

“our relations with India have continued to improve, as evidenced most recently by the £250 million contract awarded to Westlands and British Aerospace to supply Sea King [military] helicopters and Sea Eagle missiles [to the Indian Navy]. We have been seeking a closer political dialogue with the Indian Government. It would therefore seem appropriate for Mr Rao to call on the Prime Minister during his forthcoming visit.”⁶⁴

In October 1983, the FCO wrote a brief for Downing Street in preparation for Rao's visit, which told Thatcher to make points including: “Relations excellent. ... Defence sales: Delighted with agreement to purchase Sea King helicopters and Sea Eagle missiles.”⁶⁵ The briefing background paper noted that “Relations in past 2-3 years better than for some time past. ... Recent defence sales successes. Close rapport between Prime Minister and Mrs Gandhi.”

The FCO enthused that “Over the past two years, there has been a major change in India's policy of defence equipment purchases. India now looks less to the Soviet Union and more to Europe as a major supplier.” Attempts to break India away from her pro-Soviet inclination also underlay much of UK foreign policy in these years. A draft paper for the Joint Intelligence Committee explained that, “India sees the UK, and other Western European countries, as useful suppliers of advanced technology and arms and as a counter-balance to over-dependence on the Soviet Union.”⁶⁶

The primary objective of a Royal Navy task group visit to India in 1983 was:

“To encourage greater ties between the Indian and British armed forces. A readiness by the UK to co-operate with the Indians over defence matters is an important political and psychological demonstration of Western support, reduces reliance on the Soviet Union and undermines the arguments of those in India who wish to see closer links with Moscow.”⁶⁷

The geo-political objective was “to counter-balance Soviet influence by demonstrating the West's importance to India as a reliable source of effective assistance and to foster the right political climate for commercial sales.”⁶⁸

A US State Department research paper on India-USSR relations commented that “Diversification of arms sources began under the Janata government that displaced Gandhi's between 1977 and 1980 and have continued under Gandhi. Indications are that West European suppliers will be greater beneficiaries than those of the US.” It added that “There are clear indications that India is seeking to distance itself somewhat from the Soviet Union”.⁶⁹ The briefing paper for a meeting with the American Secretary of State said that, “Major Western interest [is] to wean them [Indian] further away from Russians ... India's foreign policy is undergoing adjustment. The relationship with the Soviet Union is becoming less dominant. The Indians have moved to strengthen ties with Western Europe”.

63 FCO 37/3184, Briefs on India, folio 18, 24th May 1983

64 PREM 19/1156, Visit of the Indian Minister of External Affairs Mr Marasimha Rao, August 1983 – November 1983. Letter dated 22 August 1983, page 3 of pdf. NB: I do not believe that this file contains a complete record of all the correspondence that took place.

65 PREM 19/1156, Visit of the Indian Minister of External Affairs Mr Marasimha Rao, August 1983 – November 1983. Letter dated 27 October 1983, pages 4-12 of pdf.

66 FCO 37/3243 The Indian internal political situation and foreign policy: draft paper for the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC).

67 FCO 37/3184, Briefs on India, folio 19, 29/6/83

68 FCO 37/3683 Bilateral aid to India, 29 August 1984

69 FCO 37/3627, Relations between India and the Soviet Union. 18th January 1984

Reflecting this shift, in 1983 the Ministry of Defence had made the significant step of allowing more high-tech military equipment to be sold to India, an indication that the British military felt India could now be trusted not to pass technical secrets onto Moscow. The decision was made on the basis of “the political and commercial importance of our relations with India and the recent strengthening of our defence contacts.”⁷⁰ Handwritten notes by FCO South Asia Department members showed that they were “Jubilant”,

The Royal Navy also helped secure further arms deals with India in 1983, by giving India's defence minister a tour of the aircraft carrier HMS Invincible so that he could see Sea Harrier jets operating.

During a stopover in Mumbai, a lunch and cocktail parties were “well attended” by the Indian Navy, local dignitaries and some 25 British industry representatives. The navy visit generated arms sales:

“The Indian Navy were pleased with the arrangements that had been made, and industry was gratified at the exposure to their customers in an operational environment. The Defence Minister (Mr Venkataraman) told the High Commissioner that because of the visit he had been able to obtain approval for a further but [sic] of Sea Harriers earlier than anticipated. Great interest was shown in the equipment on board and industry is following up the initiatives.”⁷¹

British diplomats congratulated the ship's Admiral, telling him that, “This is gratifyingly clear and concrete proof of the value of your deployment as a support to our overseas interests.”⁷² This incident demonstrates the role played by UK armed forces in promoting arms sales to India through their interaction with Indian military personnel, a factor that Heywood completely overlooked in his review of the motivation for the SAS officer's reconnaissance mission to Amritsar.

The British High Commission's annual review of 1983 described it as “a boom year for our bilateral relations”, highlighting that:

“British visible exports remained steady at about £800 millions. Our most spectacular successes were in the defence field, notably the large contract for Sea King naval helicopters with Sea Eagle missiles and the Indian decision to buy about a dozen more Sea Harriers; and it was gratifying to know that the latter owed much to the remarkably successful visit by HMS Invincible to Bombay in October. ... The bilateral aid programme remained India's (and Britain's) largest.”⁷³

India continued to be Britain's highest recipient of aid in 1984, receiving 24% of the aid budget.⁷⁴ This was not done out of charity. The files are clear that aid was expected to pay dividends:

“The commercial and industrial objective is to use tied aid to secure more than the immediate benefit of a UK order, by deploying it in areas where British industry can reasonably hope for further business. In addition, specific commercial returns are expected from each aid instrument.”⁷⁵

This warming of defence relations took place with a leader who the FCO privately regarded as an autocrat. Briefing notes from October 1983 commented that “Mrs Gandhi rules in an autocratic and personalised manner”. Her autocratic and paranoid style was apparent in part of a briefing on “Sikh 'Extremist' Activity in UK”, which said that Mrs Gandhi was “beginning to believe that the Khalistan movement ... was operating 'with direction and support from Washington and other European capitals'.” Although the FCO said that this was “preposterous”, they noted that it reflected “Mrs Gandhi's genuinely-held concerns about foreign support for extremist groups in India.”

The briefing then goes on to explain to Thatcher the activities of Khalistan activists in Britain. The FCO commented that “The Indian Government have expressed concern at Chauhan's activities in the UK, most recently in October 1982.” Therefore, at the same time that Whitehall was pursuing military deals with India, the

70 FCO 37/3233, Defence relations between India and the UK, folio 1, 5th January 1983

71 FCO 37/3644, Confidential UK eyes B briefing dated 16 April 1984

72 FCO 37/3236, Sale of Sea King and Westland W30 helicopters to India, folio 169, 31st October 1983

73 FCO 37/3645, 16th January 1984

74 FCO 37/3683, Bilateral aid to India

75 FCO 37/3683 Bilateral aid to India, 29 August 1984

Prime Minister herself was already aware that Indira Gandhi had 'concerns' about the activities of Khalistan activists in Britain, a crucial fact that Heywood omitted from his review.



Mr Venkataraman Indian Defence Minister

The FCO stressed the importance of this meeting, telling Downing Street that it was “a good opportunity to impress on Mr Rao, one of the weightier members of Mrs Gandhi's cabinet, the importance the Prime Minister personally attaches to a productive relationship with India.”⁷⁶ That same month, October 1983, the MOD wrote to Downing Street preparing for the visit of the Indian defence minister, Venkataraman.⁷⁷ The MOD told Thatcher that:

“The Foreign Office regard Mr Venkataraman as being on par with the Indian Foreign Minister [Rao] as the member of Mrs Gandhi's Cabinet most important to British interests and have been trying for some years to persuade him to visit this country ... the reason for extending an invitation at this time is primarily to build on the sizeable defence sales, which could be as much as £1 billion in the coming year, and wider Defence contracts.”

Thatcher underlined and highlighted “£1 billion in the coming year”. Her list of “points to make” included “Flourishing Indo-British defence relationship. Attach importance to maintaining close and mutually beneficial defence relations.”⁷⁸ After the meeting, Downing Street told the MOD that “The Prime Minister [had] expressed her pleasure at the high degree of co-operation between the UK and India on military matters, especially defence equipment.”⁷⁹

Heywood's team only reviewed the files from December 1983 onwards, thereby missing this vital context. During the preceding months, there had been significant developments on the Westlands helicopter deal, with the UK company becoming India's preferred bidder by the end of October.⁸⁰ The British High Commissioner in New Delhi, Robert Wade-Gery, was extremely eager for the deal to proceed, and became impatient with the Treasury, who were unconvinced about offering aid money to secure the deal. Wade-Gery told London that “The commercial case for this sale speaks for itself”.⁸¹

In the midst of these negotiations, Thatcher visited India for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in November 1983. At the CHOGM, she became aware of the Westlands contract negotiations, and thereafter her private secretary asked the FCO to keep Downing Street informed about progress on the deal:

*“One matter which arose during the Prime Minister's visit to India for CHOGM was the prospect of Westlands winning a contract worth over £50 million for 27 of their new W 30 helicopters ... I believe that we are unlikely to win the contract unless we offer substantial aid. ...I should be most grateful for a report about our prospects for securing this contract that I can show the Prime Minister”.*⁸²

Documents relating to the CHOGM meeting make clear the close friendship between Thatcher and Indira Gandhi, speaking of a “special relationship”. The British High Commission (BHC) sent a telegram to the FCO in London and the MOD defence sales division, saying that:

*“There is a general perception in India that a special relationship exists between the Prime Minister and Mrs Gandhi. This works very much in our interests. ... there are in any case a number of points, on our commercial and defence sales interests in particular, which as seen from here it would be very useful if the PM could raise with Mrs Gandhi.”*⁸³

76 PREM 19/1156, Visit of the Indian Minister of External Affairs Mr Marasimha Rao, August 1983 – November 1983. Letter dated 28 October 1983, page 23 of pdf.

77 PREM 19/1273 UK/India relations part 3, November 1982 – February 1984. Letter dated 19 October 1983 pages 16-17 of pdf

78 PREM 19/1273 UK/India relations part 3, November 1982 – February 1984. Letter dated 4 November 1983, page 20 of pdf

79 PREM 19/1273 UK/India relations part 3, November 1982 – February 1984. Letter dated 9 November 1983, page 25 of pdf

80 OD 27/415, Aid for Westlands helicopters, August 1983- December 1983. Letter dated 31 October 1983, page 13 of pdf.

81 OD 27/415, Aid for Westlands helicopters, August 1983- December 1983. Letter dated 16 November 1983, page 24 of pdf.

82 OD 27/415, Aid for Westlands helicopters, August 1983- December 1983. Letter dated 30 November 1983, page 30 of pdf.

83 PREM 19/969, COMMONWEALTH. Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Delhi, November 1983: policy; part 5. Letter dated 24 October 1983, pages 4-5 of pdf

Another letter from the FCO to Downing Street, titled “CHOGM: Meeting with Mrs Gandhi” reveals that the scale of India's demand for arms had grown again, noting that “During the next 3-4 years, we have hopes of winning a significant share of the potential £2 billion defence sales market in India”.⁸⁴ Although in the event, Thatcher was reluctant to raise the matter at the CHOGM, which had a wide and varied agenda, these files show that by November 1983 Thatcher was fully aware of the Westlands deal and other commercial/military trade opportunities in India. A note from the high commissioner to Thatcher just before the CHOGM reminded her that:

“The Indian Foreign and Defence Ministers whom you met in London earlier in November are two of her closest advisers. A brief reference to your conversation with them would give you an opportunity to express pleasure at the Indian award of their naval helicopter contract to Westlands (20 Sea Kings with Sea Eagle missiles to a value of £200 million plus); and at their decision, just taken to buy 12 more Sea Harriers. You could go on to say that the Light Combat Aircraft project is, we hope, the next major area for Indo-British arms supply collaboration. ... If India opts for a British partner it will mean a great deal of business for BAE, Rolls Royce and associated companies.”⁸⁵

Heywood's review only examined files after these meetings Thatcher had with three of India's most senior politicians, thereby missing out on a considerable amount of context which clearly demonstrates the paramount importance of arms sales to Anglo-Indian relations in the build-up to Operation Bluestar.

The first file that Heywood regards as relevant covers a visit by the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator to London on 15 and 16 December 1983, which he said coincided with an escalation at the *Sri Harmandir Sahib*⁸⁶. This document was not available to our researcher at the archives and we believe it forms part of a Cabinet Office intelligence file on India which has been withheld and is subject to our appeal before the Information Tribunal.⁸⁷ At this stage we have to take Heywood's word that “No request for military advice was made during this visit. Nor is there any evidence that planning for, or assistance with, any potential operations at the temple complex were discussed with the UK authorities.” Full disclosure of these discussions is essential to form an independent view, especially as the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator went on to be a key contact in arranging the SAS officer's visit to Amritsar.



Westland W30 Military helicopter



Westland Sea King helicopter

84 PREM 19/969, COMMONWEALTH. Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Delhi, November 1983: policy; part 5. Letter dated 11 November 1983, page 7 of pdf

85 PREM 19/970 COMMONWEALTH. Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Delhi, November 1983: policy; part 6. Letter dated 22 November 1983, page 6 of pdf.

86 Heywood's report says that on the 15th “a large number of dissidents fortified Sri Harmandir Sahib complex at Amritsar”

87 CAB 163/452

5. SAS advice and the Westlands helicopter deal

Britain's co-operation with India's security apparatus heightened in the six months preceding Operation Blue Star. Running parallel to this process, there were extensive efforts by Thatcher's government to secure trade contracts in India for British companies. Heywood claims that there was no causal connection between the trade deals and security cooperation. To refute his assertion, we have set out the available material from the National Archives to show how implausible his position is.



Timothy Raison

In January 1984, Timothy Raison, the Overseas Aid minister, visited India to discuss the Westlands deal with the Indian finance minister.⁸⁸ Also that month, Norman Tebbit (then Secretary of State for the Department of Trade and Industry, DTI), visited India and reported back to Thatcher at length about other trade opportunities.⁸⁹ French officials began to protest at Britain's use of aid to secure the deal with India, and in the course of that correspondence the FCO learnt that the chairman of the rival French helicopter firm was President Mitterrand's brother.⁹⁰ This was certain to be a high level trade dispute.

The files show that Thatcher was well briefed on, and familiar with, the defence and commercial sale opportunities to India at the start of 1984. This is significant because it was on 3 February 1984 that the FCO sought approval from Downing Street for the UK to advise India on the situation at Sri Harmandir Sahib. The

correspondence, marked 'top secret and personal', said that:

*"Representatives of the various extremist [sic] Sikh groups have, over the last year or so, taken up residence within the Golden Temple at Amritsar; some of them are believed to be armed. ... A recent widening of the rift between the moderates and extremists may soon force the Indians into some sort of action. They are now therefore preparing a contingency plan for action against the extremists. It is this plan on which the Indians have sought expert advice."*⁹¹

The request came from the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator, and the letter said, "the matter was of considerable importance to the Indian government."⁹² The letter notes that:

*"The High Commissioner in New Delhi fully supports the proposal. He has commented that the request demonstrates the close relationship between Britain and India. A positive response would earn a good deal of credit; at the same time Mrs Gandhi would find it hard to understand a refusal."*⁹³

Furthermore, it commented that "The Foreign Secretary believes that, in the interests of our bilateral relations with India we should respond positively to the request." Clearly then, it was this desire to protect our 'bilateral relations with India' that initiated the chain of events whereby an SAS officer visited India from 8-17 February to carry out a reconnaissance on the Sri Harmandir Sahib.

Interspersed with the Amritsar letters, there is considerable correspondence about the Westlands deal, and whilst there is no explicit linkage, it is heavily implied.⁹⁴ Heywood himself wrote that "The recommendation and decision to agree this request were based in advice from the British High Commission that it would be good for the bilateral relationship, whereas refusal would not be



88 OD 27/416, Aid for Westlands helicopters, December 1983 – January 1984. Letter dated 4 January 1984, pages 8-13 of pdf.

89 PREM 19/1273, UK/India relations part 3, November 1982 – February 1984. Letter dated 18 January 1984, pages 32-37.

90 OD 27/416, Aid for Westlands helicopters, December 1983 – January 1984. Letter dated 25 January 1984, page 26 of pdf.

91 HEYWOOD ANNEX B

92 HEYWOOD ANNEX B

93 PREM 19/1273, UK/India relations part 3, November 1982 – February 1984. Letter dated 3 February 1984, pages 45-46 of pdf. Document re-inserted into file following Heywood review.

94 (Although most pages in this file have been put back in place after the Heywood review, there was still one document missing from the file – a letter from "Butler to Fall dated 27 February 1984" in PREM 19/1273, UK/India relations part 3, November 1982 – February 1984. Letter dated 27 February 1984, page 71 of pdf. This letter should be requested.)

understood by the Indian Prime Minister, Mrs Gandhi". As the Foreign Secretary well knew, Britain's 'bilateral relations with India' in February 1984 were dominated by the Westlands helicopter contract negotiations. It is hard to see how Heywood therefore reached his conclusion that:

"there is no record linking the provision of UK military advice to the discussion of potential defence or helicopter sales; or to any other policy or commercial issue. The scope for such a linkage is not suggested in any submission to, or comment from, a UK Minister or official. In sum, there is no evidence that the UK, at any level, attempted to use the fact that military advice had been given on request to advance any commercial objective."

Further evidence from the files shows that on 3 February 1984, the same day that the FCO forwarded India's request for military advice to Thatcher, the department was actually debating the Westlands deal. The FCO commented that losing the deal "would do major damage to our standing in the acute commercial competition we are engaged in in India with the French, particularly in the defence sales area."⁹⁵ That same day, the Department of Trade wrote to the FCO:

*"to set out in some detail the very strong commercial case for agreeing to the Indian request for aid [money]. We see this order for ONGC as of very great importance for the development of Westlands civil helicopter business. ... The next 15-20 years are forecast to see a decline in military helicopter sales so diversification into the civil market is necessary even to maintain Westlands level of output. For obvious reasons, the Government attaches importance to maintaining a British capability in helicopters. ... The present Indian tender represents by far the largest contract available today anywhere in the world. ... International competition is intense and we risk very serious consequences unless we can respond quickly to the Indian request for aid [money] which was received over two months ago."*⁹⁶

The same day that the SAS adviser arrived in India, 8 February, the files provide clear evidence that the FCO linked military assistance with arms sales. A letter from the British High Commission to the MOD about an Indian Army officer attending a gunnery course in the UK said that, "Our interest in getting India army officer on this course includes defence sales reasons."⁹⁷ The course would be fully subsidised by the UK at the cost of £120,000.⁹⁸

Once the SAS adviser was in Amritsar, Britain's preoccupation with the Westlands deal only increased. Whitehall went to extraordinary lengths to win this contract, granting a vast amount of financial aid to India. Overseas Development Administration files contain explicit comments from the DTI and FCO about the commercial and political importance of the Westlands deal going ahead. Meanwhile, the French were threatening to match the UK's aid offer to India. On 10 February (i.e. after the PM had approved military advice for India), the FCO wrote that losing the Westlands deal "could have most unfortunate repercussions for the acute commercial competition in which we are engaged with the French in India, particularly in the defence sales area ... The commercial consequences would be grave. As regards helicopters the French would regain the position they lost in the Indian market when Westlands won the Sea King order last year."⁹⁹

On 14 February 1984, while the SAS adviser was in India, Tebbit wrote a memo strongly supporting the Westlands deal, going as far as arguing that losing the deal "would imply that the sale of Sea Kings to the Indian Navy last year had turned sour, calling into question follow-on sales on that contract."¹⁰⁰ At a meeting in mid-February, ministers gave approval to grant India £50 million of aid to secure the Westlands deal. On 16 February, Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe telegraphed the BHC in New Delhi to say, "Ministers have now agreed that the project should go ahead."¹⁰¹ The SAS adviser left India the next day.

The FCO sent Downing Street a debrief of the adviser's Amritsar visit on 23 February. It said that "Our speedy response to the Indians' request for assistance was very much appreciated by them". The SAS officer made a "ground reconnaissance of the Golden Temple complex", from which he was "able to advise the Indians of a

95 OD 27/417, Aid for Westlands helicopters, January 1984 – February 1984. Letter dated 3 February 1984, pages 13-14 of pdf

96 OD 27/417, Aid for Westlands helicopters, January 1984 – February 1984. Letter dated 3 February 1984, pages 17-19 of pdf

97 FCO 37/3662, UK Training assistance to India, 1984, Letter dated 8 February 1984, folio 1, page 2 of pdf

98 FCO 37/3662, UK Training assistance to India, 1984, Letter dated 5 March 1985, folio 5, page 9 of pdf

99 OD 27/417, Aid for Westlands helicopters, January 1984 – February 1984. Letter dated 10 February 1984, pages 33-34 of pdf

100 OD 27/418, Aid for Westlands helicopters, February 1984 – March 1984. Letter dated 14 February 1984, pages 6-7 of pdf

101 OD 27/418, Aid for Westlands helicopters, February 1984 – March 1984. Letter dated 16 February 1984, page 12 of pdf

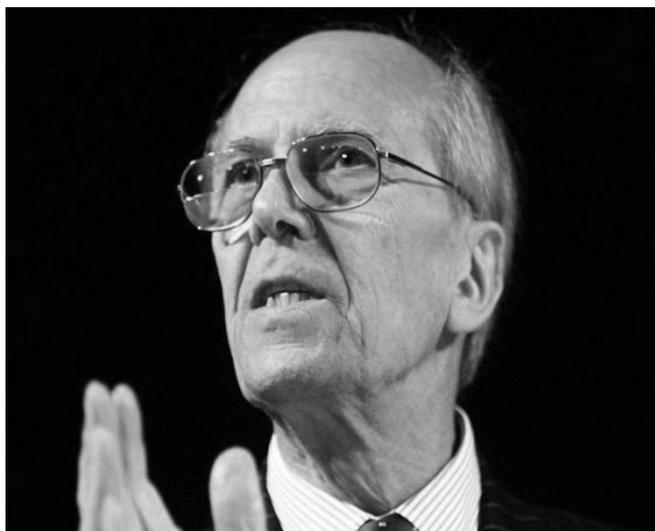
realistic and workable plan which Mrs Gandhi approved".¹⁰² It is therefore clear that the British advice was being used at the highest possible level on the Indian side. The British High Commissioner in Delhi commented that "our reaction to the Indian request can have done Anglo/Indian relations nothing but good." The FCO believed that the SAS officer's top-secret plan would be put into effect, that Amritsar would be raided, and that it would cause outcry among the Sikh diaspora ("possible repercussions among the Sikh community here"). These extraordinary risks were justified, on the grounds that "Anglo/Indian relations" would benefit.¹⁰³

The priority for Anglo-Indian relations at that time was the Westlands deal, in which Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe was frequently involved, showing that it was an issue at ministerial level. Political support for the deal extended right to the top of government. There is a letter written at the end of February 1984 which shows that Prime Minister Thatcher herself was of the view that when it came to the Westlands helicopter deal, "we do not wish to lose this valuable business".¹⁰⁴ In March, Thatcher agreed to increase the aid available to £65 million, in order to secure (in the words of Norman Tebbit) the "largest ever civil helicopter order".

The Heywood Review hardly made any reference to the extent of these efforts to secure the Westlands helicopter deal, as well as the other military contracts that were in the pipeline. When they are properly taken into account, Heywood's claim that the decision to send an SAS adviser to Amritsar was not motivated by trade concerns seems fanciful. A steering brief for the Defence Procurement minister's visit to India in April/May 1984 said that the principal UK objectives for his trip were:

"To demonstrate and further the close Anglo-Indian relationship both in defence and other fields. To promote the sale of British defence equipment by drawing attention to its quality. To show our willingness to provide military training and assistance to the Indian Armed forces."

Britain's willingness to provide assistance to the Indian army, and sell them weapons, were one and the same.



Norman Tebbit Secretary of State for DTI



PM Margaret Thatcher & Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe

102 Heywood Review, Annex D

103 Could quote more from this document about the "extreme embarrassment" a leak might cause

104 OD 27/418, Aid for Westlands helicopters, February 1984 – March 1984. Letter dated 27 February 1984, page 25 of pdf

6. Requests for para-military assistance after SAS visit

The Heywood Review claimed that the SAS officer's "instructions were that no UK manpower or equipment should be offered beyond the visit of this single military adviser." Heywood refused to publish the SAS report, but said that "The UK advice also focused on command and control arrangements, and night-time co-ordination of para-military with Indian Special Group forces." India's police included heavily armed 'para-military' divisions, such as the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) or Border Security Force (BSF), whose members resembled soldiers rather than constables (these should not be confused with clandestine 'para-military' groups like the IRA or UVF).

Although Heywood claimed the SAS officer did not recommend further assistance, it is curious that shortly after the Amritsar trip, Indian officials asked Britain for training and equipment for para-military forces, and asked for a space on an army diver's course. Divers were used in the first phase of Operation Blue Star, to clear wells suspected of being arms dumps. Conceivably, this request for diver training could have been prompted by consultations with the SAS adviser, given the large water pool (sacred sarovar) surrounding the *Sri Harmandir Sahib*. The Indian Army was booked on a completely different course and asked to change to the divers' course in March 1984. It is not clear from the files, which are censored, what caused that shift. The British High Commissioner said that, "although not on original list of Indian bids we would strongly support re-allotment of UKMTAS funds to diver course although appreciate likely to be more expensive".¹⁰⁵

There are a few more documents available about the discussion to train para-military units. An Indian police official called on the Assistant Defence Adviser at the British High Commission, Wing Commander Cross, to ask for spaces on UK police and paramilitary courses. In a censored letter from 28 February, the adviser noted dryly that "Some of their requirements when identified may raise other policy implications ... For the more military of the paramilitary forces (who have a border security role in pure military as well as anti-smuggling and illegal immigrant terms) some UK Army courses may well fit the bill".¹⁰⁶



Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe

Foreign Secretary Howe responded favourably, telling the Wing Commander that "In cases of particular need we can agree to help with policemen attending military courses."¹⁰⁷ The next day, the FCO's Overseas Police Adviser, Mr Bryan, told the assistant defence adviser that "on the orthodox police training net, there are provisions through British Council for English language tuition in the UK at various levels." He went on to say, "What is really needed ... is more detail from the Indians as to what it is they are really looking for".¹⁰⁸ The clear implication is that paramilitary police training was not 'orthodox', but arrangements could be made. There are no further references to this training in the file, which was suspiciously slender, or in any of the other records available at the archive. However, there was plenty of British aid money available for India to receive such training. The UK Military Training Assistance Scheme (UKMTAS) funding for India in the financial year 1984/85 was increased from £270,000 to £400,000.¹⁰⁹

Heywood's claim that no equipment was offered for the Amritsar raid is also deeply suspect. The morning after the SAS advisor left India, the MOD sent a telegram to a company called Belstaff International Ltd, asking if it could supply bullet proof vests to the Indian Para-military Forces. The company responded enthusiastically. The customer was the Indian Border Security Force, who had contacted the British High Commission.¹¹⁰ The timing of the request is too much of a coincidence given the SAS Officer's advice was how to 'co-ordinate para-military' forces in a raid on Amritsar.

Subsequent correspondence from mid-March 1984 reveals that: "the British High Commission in New Delhi have been actively pursuing the Indian Para Military with a view to promoting UK manufactured equipment. The

¹⁰⁵ FCO 37/3662, UK training assistance to India, 1984

¹⁰⁶ FCO 37/3662, UK training assistance to India, 1984, Letter dated 28 February 1984, folio 4, pp 7-8 of pdf

¹⁰⁷ FCO 37/3662, UK training assistance to India, 1984, Letter dated 8 March 1984, folio 6, page 10 of pdf

¹⁰⁸ FCO 37/3662, UK training assistance to India, 1984, Letter dated 9 March 1984, folio 7, page 11 of pdf

¹⁰⁹ FCO 37/3662, UK training assistance to India, 1984, Letter dated 6 April 1984, folio 9, pages 14-17 of pdf

¹¹⁰ FCO 37/3669, F30, 20 February 1984 and 29 February 1984

Defence Advisor in New Delhi [Brigadier Cornell] is also anxious to encourage all 3 branches of the Indian Para Military to attend the British Army Equipment Exhibition (BAEE 84) in June this year.”¹¹¹

A confidential 'UK eyes B'¹¹² briefing from mid-April 1984, written for the defence procurement minister's visit to India, said that: “The various wings of the Indian para-military and border security forces would appear to offer a potentially large and so far untapped market for a wide range of internal security equipment. The Indian paramilitary number 1.2M men.” It added that, “We are looking to satisfy the Indian para military thirst for knowledge of UK activities by supplying them with equipment reports on items used by the police. Action on this is in hand.”¹¹³

There was debate between the MOD and FCO about whether it was appropriate to sell 'non-lethal' internal security kit to Indian para-military units. The FCO was in favour of equipping such forces, *in the explicit knowledge that the gear could be used for a raid on Amritsar*. This crucial fact was completely omitted from the Heywood Review.

The MOD worried that such sales “could cause presentational and political problems to the UK”, and were specifically concerned about the provision of rubber bullets or baton rounds to Indian para-military units. Authorities in Delhi had asked the MOD for “British army assessments, trial reports, equipment analysis and comparisons of various equipment that we use.” The MOD's 'Defence Secretariat 6a' was “not prepared to release information on the specific case of Northern Ireland.”¹¹⁴ The defence procurement minister was warned before his visit to India in April-May 1984 that:

“One problem MOD have with the Indian para military is their insistence of being made aware of what internal security equipments are used by the British Army. This leads directly into British Army activities in Northern Ireland and obviously information of this nature cannot be released on security grounds.”¹¹⁵

Baton rounds, as used by troops in Northern Ireland, have never been permitted for police forces in England, Scotland or Wales. In 1981, security forces in Northern Ireland fired a record 29,695 plastic bullet baton rounds, resulting in the deaths of seven people from April to August, including a 12-year-old girl, Carol Ann Kelly.¹¹⁶ Internal MOD documents, now declassified, have revealed that the British Army privately knew some of its baton round equipment could cause fatalities.¹¹⁷ It is not surprising then that the MOD did not want India to see their “equipment analysis” of this faulty kit.

However, the Foreign Office felt that the MOD was getting “unduly vexed” over this issue, and seemed oblivious to the internal reports. One diplomat commented that “I do not see a problem in providing data on the effectiveness of items”.¹¹⁸ John Ramsden, who is now a member of the National Archives censorship board, argued at the time that:

“Neither the High Commission, nor the other Whitehall Departments concerned, seem to share this concern. Nor do I. Indian para military forces are likely to find themselves holding the ring in situations of serious inter-communal fighting. Modern equipment, such as rubber bullets, will help them to do the job with as little loss to life and limb as possible. India is a democracy, therefore it is legitimate that the Indians should have access to British techniques for maintaining law and order. It would be a sad day for India if her para military forces were to seek the advice of Soviet experts.”¹¹⁹

Other members of the South Asia Department argued strongly in favour, with Cleghorn himself commenting in a handwritten note that:

“The central government paramilitary forces (CRP, BSF etc) are better trained and more efficient than the

111 FCO 37/3669, 14 March 1984

112 UK Eyes B is a security classification which means the document should only be viewed by UK nationals.

113 FCO 37/3644, 16 April 1984

114 FCO 37/3669, 14 March 1984, *Indian para-military forces: internal security equipment*.

115 FCO 37/3644, 16 April 1984

116 Committee on the Administration of Justice, *Plastic Bullets and the Law*, March 1990

117 Pat Finucane Centre, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/jun/11/mod-rubber-bullets-lethal-records>

118 FCO 37/3669, F36, 26th March 1984

119 FCO 37/3669, 21st March 1984

*local state police and are essential to the maintenance of public order. There is a risk that they might be used in aggression, which would attract adverse publicity in the UK (e.g. clearing out the Golden Temple). But our defence would be that we were simply supplying police equipment to the government of a democracy with which we have close relations to enable it to cope with threat from political forces ready to use violence in pursuit of their objectives.” [emphasis added]*¹²⁰

It is deeply concerning that Cleghorn, who has gone on to censor Foreign Office files, argued in March 1984 for Britain to supply Indian para-military units with internal security equipment, knowing that it risked being used in a raid on Amritsar, and that this fact was omitted from the Heywood Review. Instead, Heywood claimed that “There is no evidence in the files, or from discussion with officials involved at the time, that other forms of assistance for the operation – for example equipment or tactical intelligence – were provided for the Indian operation.”

Civil servants at that time were expected to approve arms deals. Whitehall had issued guidance on the, “General considerations concerning the political approval for the export of defence and internal security equipment”.¹²¹ This document stated that, “The government have said that they wish to increase the sale of British defence equipment overseas. All applications for the export of defence and internal security equipment should therefore be approved unless there are compelling reasons for not doing so.”

In the midst of this debate, the FCO's South Asia Department commented that:

*“India's human rights record is not perfect and has been criticised by Amnesty International and similar organisations, but it is a democracy with an effective judiciary, and an independent press which takes a considerable interest in human rights questions. In recent years there has therefore been no question of our refusing to sell to India either arms, or equipment for internal security purposes.”*¹²²

The clear impression from the files is that Whitehall intended to equip India's para-military units, in the knowledge that they might raid Amritsar. Ultimately, these units did play an active role in Operation Blue Star. On 1 June 1984, the British High Commission noted press reports that “CRPF security personnel fortified a building opposite the place within the Golden Temple where Bhindranwale [a Sikh leader] holds meetings. ... five more battalions of paramilitary forces have been deployed into Punjab.”¹²³



Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale holding a meeting with Sikhs at Sri Harmandir Sahib complex

120 FCO 37/3669, F36, 27th March 1984

121 FCO 37/3670 Arms Working Party: applications for sales of defence equipment to India.

122 FCO 37/3695, F14, Human rights in India, April 1984

123 FCO 37/3585, F116, 1 June 1984

7. Peace talks collapsed day SAS left India

The Heywood Review claimed that, “The UK military adviser was in India between 8-17 February, including a ground recce, with the Indian Special Group, of the temple complex. This was before — and unrelated to - the exchange of fire between Indian security forces and the occupiers of *Sri Harmandir Sahib* that started on 17 February.” However, Heywood failed to mention the significance of this shoot-out on that day, which caused irreparable damage to negotiations. The Review also did not consider the possibility that the SAS adviser's visit might have motivated Indian units to probe the perimeter defences of the *Sri Harmandir Sahib*, resulting in the breakdown in talks.

The SAS adviser made his visit to Amritsar in the midst of fragile tripartite peace talks between Indira Gandhi, the Akali Dal party and Sant Bhindranwale's group (who were occupying the site). These talks collapsed on 17 February, the day the SAS officer left India, due to what the British High Commission described as an “unprecedented confrontation” between para-military units from the Central Reserve Police Force and the occupiers of the holy site. Three people were killed and three injured from all sides in the six hour shoot out.

In giving his reasons for walking away from the negotiating table, Sikh leaders specifically referred to the recent arrival of a commando unit in Amritsar, which appears to be a reference to the Indian Special Group team that the SAS adviser was attached to. The British High Commission said that:

*“Longowal announced that the Akalis would not participate in the next round of Tripartite talks in view of the firing at the GT and other violent incident in Haryana and Punjab in recent days. He accused the central government of engineering the incidents. Tohra, the president of the SGPC, said that the Golden Temple incident was a rehearsal for a planned entry into the GT complex and he claimed that a commando unit had arrived in Amritsar for this purpose. ... The sharp deterioration in the security situation therefore continues and the golden temple incident has put paid to the tripartite talks for the time being.”*¹²⁴ [Emphasis added]

The long-term consequences of this incident cannot be understated. Staff at the British High Commission commented that “the situation is as bad as it has ever been in the two and a half years that I have been following it.” He said that any peace process “has been completely torpedoed by the sudden wave of violence in Punjab ... the exchange of fire at the Golden Temple (Sikh extremists versus Security forces) undoubtedly raised the temperature.”¹²⁵ The South Asia Department briefed ministers that, “In early February, Mrs Gandhi proposed tripartite talks between the Government, the non-Sikh opposition parties, and the Akali Dal, but these had to be postponed following a further outbreak of violence.”¹²⁶

The peace talks never recovered and the parties became increasingly polarised, leading to Indira Gandhi's eventual decision to raid Amritsar. The Heywood Review said that the SAS adviser “made clear that this type of operation should only be put into effect as a last resort when all other courses of negotiation had failed.” This finding completely overlooked the fact that the SAS visit to Amritsar with an Indian commando unit itself led to a breakdown in peace talks.



Sikh leaders of the Akali Dal party 1984, (Gurbachan Singh Tohra, Parkash Singh Badal, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal), walk away from talks with the Indian government following the deployment of security forces in Amritsar.



124 FCO 37/3582, F20, 20 February 1984

125 FCO 37/3582, F27, 23 February 1984

126 FCO 37/3582, F37, 12 March 1984

8. Whitehall expected raid on Amritsar day before Blue Star

The Heywood Review claimed that “the UK received no warning from the Indian authorities of the launch of the operation.” This claim is misleading. In fact, the Foreign Office anticipated a raid on Amritsar at least the day before Operation Blue Star began, but made no attempt to deter Mrs Gandhi from attacking the holy site, believing it would boost her chances of re-election.

British diplomats spoke approvingly of a possible assault on Amritsar, with one commenting in March 1984 that:

“some real action against the extremists (e.g. a Golden Temple operation) must await the next extremist outrage [two lines redacted]. Above all there is a sense in which she needs to show progress on Punjab or mount a successful operation against the extremists not too long before a General Election otherwise the memory of triumph will fade.”¹²⁷

The British High Commission said in April 1984 that, “a dramatic gesture e.g. against the Golden Temple (or some unexpected settlement), might be an important plus for her at the polls.”¹²⁸ A raid was wrongly predicted for that month, “There have been a few little signs recently which, taken together, could suggest that some kind of operation against the Sikh extremists in the Golden Temple might be attempted over the next few days.”¹²⁹

UK officials expected specialist squads to be involved, commenting that: “A general changing of the guard in Amritsar would of course provide cover for the deployment of special units likely to be required for a Golden Temple operation.” There is also evidence of an implicit warning that something was about to happen: “we know that [two lines redacted] was almost continuously at meetings on Punjab in the period around 11 April. He commented privately to a member of my staff that ‘the next ten days (i.e. 11-21 April) would be crucial for Punjab’.” Another factor was a full moon on 16 April. The files noted that “If some kind of operation were to be mounted at night a good moon would be a major advantage.” There is no evidence that HMG tried to discourage Mrs Gandhi from this course of action, instead observing “whether she is prepared to cash in on the undoubted popularity which a really successful operation would earn in the country at large by going for an early election ...; and whether she can risk the possibility of a nasty Sikh backlash in Punjab, especially if the operation goes well”.

The telegram was copied to MI5, and a hand-written note on the redacted file said “Box 500 [MI5] & Protocol D[epartment] should see this. I think the police will be ... that there might be action by the Sikhs against Indian government target between now and 21 April. Note the significance of Tuesday's full moon”. Another comment said, “Spoken to PUSD - action taken.” The PUSD, or Permanent Under Secretary's Department, was the point of contact between the Foreign Office and the intelligence agencies. Although the government was concerned about a hostile reaction from Sikhs in the UK to an attack on their holiest site, as shown by the warning given to MI5, there was no effort made to discourage Indira Gandhi from proceeding down this dangerous path.

This was a false alarm, but similar observations in May - June 1984 were much more accurate. In mid-May, UK diplomats noticed “The formation of 23 'commando task force groups'. These will be deployed in various sensitive districts and operate independently from the other para-militaries.”¹³⁰ There was also a build-up of para-military units in Amritsar, and other signs, that led the British High Commissioner to tell London on 1 June that “the government may be preparing for an operation against the Golden Temple and/or possibly certain Gurdwaras in other parts of Punjab. Mrs Gandhi may wait a few days to see whether the *Morcha* [protest] turns particularly violent, which would give further justification for drastic measures. The next full moon, useful for a night-time raid, is on 13 June.”¹³¹

The High Commissioner's information was based on a meeting with Indira Gandhi's aide, and seemed fairly explicit:

“When I called yesterday evening on P C Alexander, principal secretary in charge of the PM's office, he seemed surprisingly relaxed and confident about prospects in the Punjab. ... problem was soluble and

127 FCO 37/3583, F35, 2 March 1984

128 FCO 37/3584, F67, 6 April 1984

129 FCO 37/3584, F68, 13 April 1984

130 FCO 37/3584, F97, 18 May 1984

131 FCO 37/3585, F117, 1 June 1984

would be dealt with well before the general election ... both necessary and possible for the government to take certain drastic steps ... those steps could and would be taken quite soon. ... suggest that the government may be preparing for an operation against the Golden Temple"¹³² [Emphasis added]



Indian Army prepares for assault on the Sri Harmandir Sahib

And then by 4 June 1984, the High Commissioner said that “The government certainly looks as if they are intent on a showdown. The measures have put the government in a strong position to flush the extremists out of the Golden Temple and to contain any Sikh reaction. Such an operation is now widely expected.”¹³³ Indeed, Operation Blue Star had begun. In the midst of the assault, the British High Commission met India's top diplomat, Rasgotra, who said the army had not yet entered the temple, “but if the firing continued, some of it with heavy weapons, the situation was in the hands of the army and Rasgotra could not foresee or rule anything out.”¹³⁴ Instead of trying to deter the Indian authorities from doing so, the British official merely asked for warning of any further escalations, in case it provoked a stronger backlash in the UK.

Far from criticising Indira Gandhi's attack on the holy site, British diplomats lamented that she had not done so sooner. A Foreign Office review of the assault, prepared for Geoffrey Howe in July 1984, said that, “Had she decided to move against the Golden Temple much earlier a more surgical quick commando raid (as most people in Delhi always assumed a 'Golden Temple operation' would be) might have been possible.”¹³⁵ The British High Commission explained that “delay had allowed the extremists to fortify the Golden Temple and other Gurdwaras and turned *what should have been a surgical commando raid* in Amritsar into a pitched battle with heavy casualties on both sides and considerable damage to parts of the Sikhs' holiest shrine.” [emphasis added] The sense from the files is that the SAS plan was jeopardised because the raid did not happen soon enough. In any case, British diplomats praised the Indian troops, saying that “The Army conducted themselves with great bravery and skill”.¹³⁶ The Foreign Office files contain no mention of the number of civilians who died during the assault (only soldiers or 'militants'), which numbered between 7,000 and 8,000 according to eye witness accounts.

Relationships between Indira Gandhi and Thatcher remained warm, with the Indian leader writing to her British counterpart on 14 June, justifying the atrocities that had taken place. “For months, a reign of terror was unleashed from the Temple complex, holding all Punjab to ransom. We had no choice but to send an army unit which exercised the utmost restraint, using a minimum of force”, she assured Thatcher.¹³⁷ In a sign of more repression ahead, she said, “Although the hard core of the terrorists within has been liquidated, we have a difficult period ahead of us.”

Thatcher replied to Indira Gandhi on 29 June, giving her full support for Indian unity in the face of Sikh demands for self-determination. The British Prime Minister wrote that “These have been anxious weeks for you, involving difficult decisions. I have followed closely your efforts to restore calm there, and I very much hope that the 'healing touch' for which you have called will open the way to a peaceful and prosperous future for that troubled region. Needless to say, we in the United Kingdom fully support India's unity.”¹³⁸ Thatcher also reassured Gandhi that British police were “devoting considerable resources” to safeguarding Indian government personnel in Britain.

Bi-lateral relations became increasingly framed in terms of the need to appease Indian concerns about the Sikh diaspora in the UK. Concerns over Dr Chauhan escalated by 9 July, with British diplomats in Delhi telling London that “Chauhan's activities in the UK continue to receive extensive publicity here,” and asking if Dr Chauhan can be denied British citizenship on grounds of “character, political undesirability or for other reasons?”. They also

132 FCO 37/3606, F35, 1 June 1984

133 FCO 37/3585, F121, 4 June 1984

134 FCO 37/3606, F41, 5 June 1984

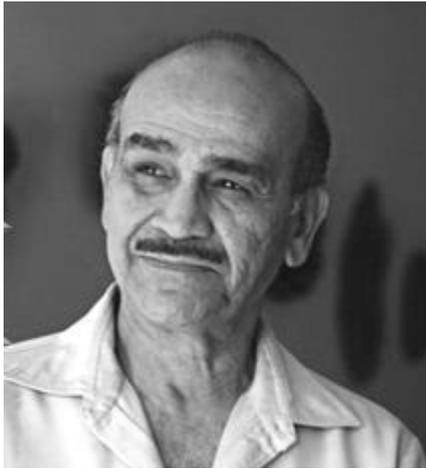
135 FCO 37/3611, F265, 6 July 1984

136 FCO 37/3611, F265, 6 July 1984

137 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985. pp355-358. 14 June 1984.

138 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985. pp330-335. 29 June 1984 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/15/margaret-thatcher-golden-temple-raid-support-letter>

enquired as to whether his expired Home Office travel document would be renewed.¹³⁹

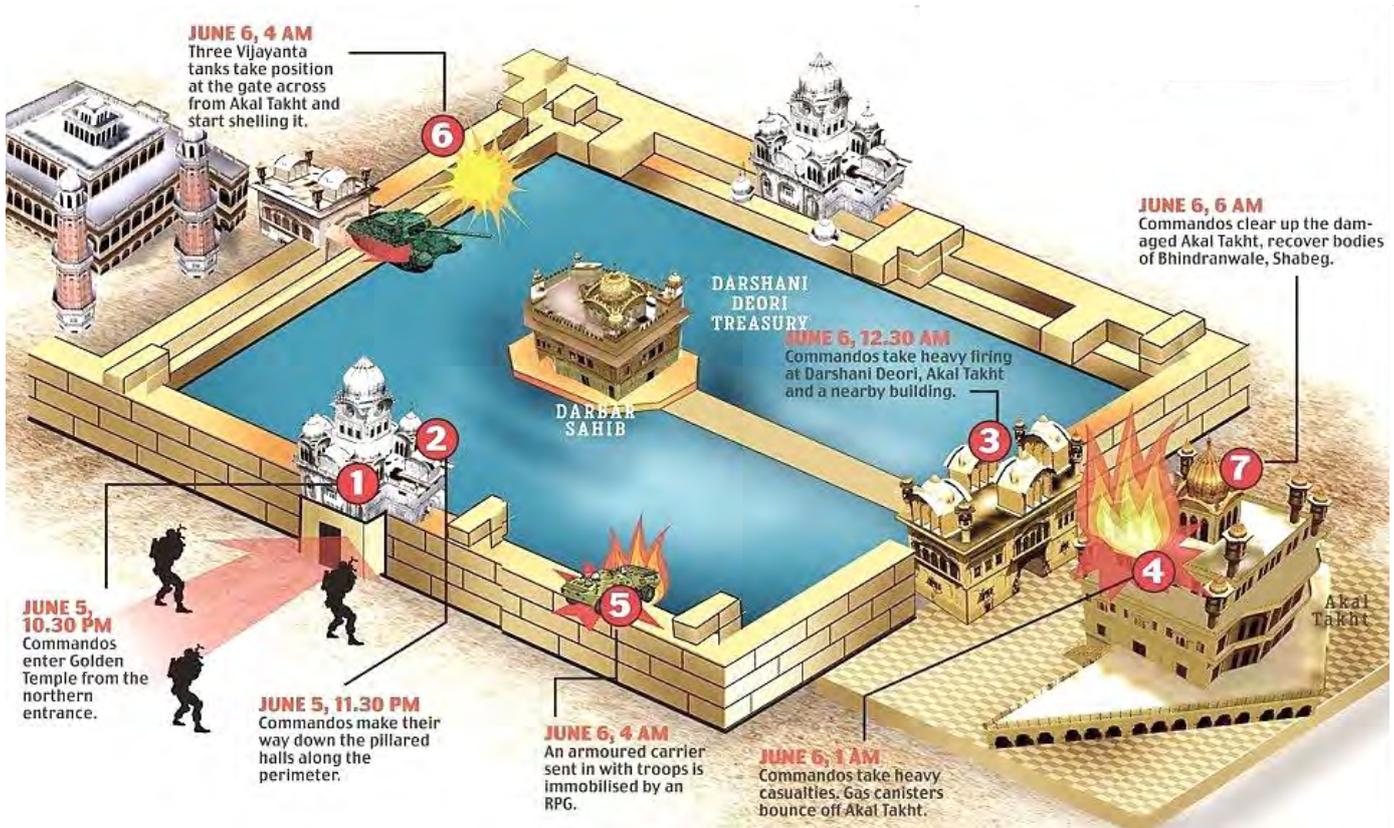


Garry Saxena RAW officer

Of further concern to the British public and the Sikh community would be the assertions made by Mary Anne Weaver. Writing for the Sunday Times a week following the attack on Sri Harmandir Sahib in June 1984 she wrote: "Last week's assault on the Golden Temple took place after months of preparation by the Indian army, which included advice from British experts in counter-insurgency. Sources in Delhi say that two officers of India's secret service, Garry Saxena and R.N Kay of the research and analysis wing, made several trips to London to seek expertise".

This confirms the worst held fears of the community that British involvement in planning and carrying out an attack on the Golden Temple was well-planned and strategised in a bi-lateral fashion and serves to underline the extent of collusion in the event and brings in to question William Hague's statement to the House of Commons that advice provided was on a one-off basis.

Indian diplomats made astonishing requests of Britain, telling Douglas Hurd that "they would like to see extremist leaders, such as Dr Chauhan taken into preventive detention."¹⁴⁰ While Hurd objected to internment, a list of people who the Indian government wanted detained was passed to Special Branch. The records show that it "turned out to be leaders of Sikh Temples".¹⁴¹ The Indian High Commission was told that "Special Branch are watching Sikh extremists, including Dr Chauhan, very closely."¹⁴²



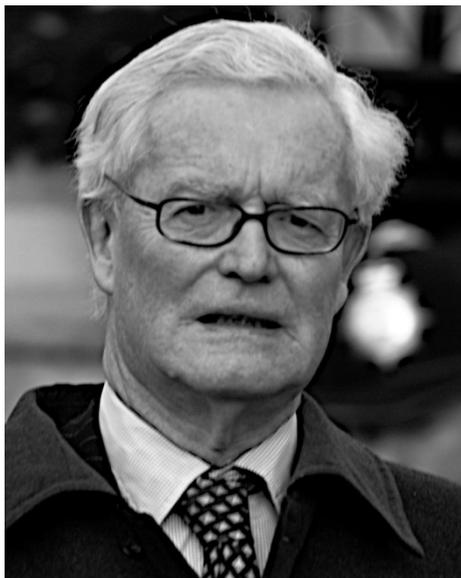
139 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985. p321. 9 July 1984. BHC Delhi to FCO London,

140 FCO 37/3607, F125, 13 June 1984

141 FCO 37/3607, F79, 8 June 1984

142 FCO 37/3607, F125, 13 June 1984

9. SAS advice on attack on holy site increased terror threat to UK



Douglas Hurd, Home Secretary

It was only after the SAS adviser had returned from Amritsar that Whitehall began to assess what consequences a raid on the *Sri Harmandir Sahib* could have. The belated assessments found that an attack on the holy site would increase the risk of terrorism in the UK. Following the Amritsar massacre, Indian government properties in Britain were targeted by disaffected Sikhs. In his 1985-1986 annual report, the head of MI5 included Sikh extremism at the top of the list of terrorist threats to mainland Britain.¹⁴³ The evidence is that Thatcher's decision to send an SAS officer to advise the Indian army on how to raid Sikhs' holiest site contributed to a sequence of events which ultimately exacerbated the terror threat in Britain. This aspect was completely absent from the Heywood Review.

To the credit of the law-abiding Sikh community, despite the tragic events of June and November 1984, and the widespread human rights violations by the Indian state for almost a decade, the vast majority of Sikhs did not pose a threat to the British state or to the wider British public. Many Sikhs helplessly watched the tragedy unfold and inevitably some violence did take place in the mid to late 1980s when emotions were running very

high. Even MI5 acknowledged this restraint, telling the Home Office that "Since June 1984 there have been a number of *relatively minor* attacks in the UK by Sikh extremists against Indian official targets and moderate Sikhs." [Emphasis added]¹⁴⁴



SECURITY SERVICE
MI5

At the start of 1984, there was some degree of surveillance of Sikh activists in Britain. Pickets of the Indian High Commission were monitored by Special Branch, and information on Dr Chauhan and a *Dal Khalsa* member, Jaswant Singh Thekedar, was passed to MI5.¹⁴⁵ (*Dal Khalsa* is a Sikh organisation).

In May 1984, after the shooting of police woman Yvonne Fletcher outside the Libyan Embassy in London, there was "concern in Whitehall about other foreign groups in the UK that might resort to violence in support of their political aims. In this context, the crisis in the Punjab has attracted a good deal of attention at a high level." The Foreign Office asked its staff in New Delhi to draw up a briefing paper on questions such as, "what would be the implications of a decision to storm the Golden Temple be? Would most Sikhs accept it as necessary or would it create a long term problem of loyalty even among moderate Sikhs?"¹⁴⁶ It is concerning that Whitehall had not considered these issues before they took the decision to send an SAS officer to advise how to storm the Golden Temple.

The British High Commission responded with a paper that looked "in particular at the implications of a decision to storm the Golden Temple at Amritsar." Its conclusions were stark: "An attack on the Golden Temple would be likely to have serious repercussions amongst the Sikh community here."¹⁴⁷ It warned that, "If the action went wrong, there is a real risk of setting off a communal bloodbath in Punjab and neighbouring states: moderate Sikh opinion could see the operation as a direct attack on Sikhism and rally to the extremist cause."

Just a week before Operation Blue Star, a terrorism sub-committee inside Whitehall wrote a paper titled "The Threat of Sikh Terrorism in the United Kingdom", which was copied to MI5.¹⁴⁸ The paper concluded that:

"The increasing level of violence in the Punjab is causing increasing concern to the Sikhs in this country, among whom a number support extremist groups. Any indications of UK support for Indian government action might increase their militancy. We would expect any Sikh violence to be directed against GOI [Government of India] rather than UK government targets. (It will be important for HMG not to appear to be

143 Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm, The Authorized History of MI5*, Penguin Books 2010 p736

144 Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm, The Authorized History of MI5*, Penguin Books 2010 p737

145 FCO 37/3606, F5, 26 January 1984 and F9 27 January 1984

146 FCO 37/3584, F90, 15 May 1984

147 FCO 37/3584, F108, 22 May 1984

148 FCO 37/3606, F26, 24 May 1984

taking sides in their matter – although minister have express concern, and sympathy, with efforts by GOI to urge calm.)

“The Indian report that Sikh extremist groups in this country have drawn up plans for attacks on official Indian targets may well be true. We doubt if the Sikh extremists have the organisational capacity to mount a sophisticated terrorist attack, but they may well have access to hand guns. They would attack Indian premises or individuals. A decision by the Indian Government to take over the Golden Temple by force would be the most likely trigger for putting such plans into action, though other developments in the Punjab such as a sharp rise in the level of inter communal violence or the number of Sikhs killed could also trigger the plans.

“The Security Service [MI5] have circulated details of the threat described above to all police forces in the UK which have significant Indian populations in their areas. The Security Service are also supplying the police with such details as are available of those involved in more extreme groups here.

“It is important that the police should be given as early information as possible of any developments in India that might lead to Sikh violence in the UK, so that they can take the necessary precautions to protect Indian diplomatic personnel and premises. [4 lines redacted]”



It is clear from this report that the British government understood that an attack on Amritsar would increase the risk of attacks on individuals and property in the UK. However, having realised this, Whitehall made no effort to discourage the Indian government from launching such an attack, and indeed it only carried out such a risk assessment three months *after* a UK military officer had given advice about how to implement such an assault. Instead, the British Sikh community was placed under surveillance, which required MI5 resources.

The consequences of Operation Blue Star were immediately felt in Britain, almost exactly as anticipated by the report above. British officials noted that “The Army’s assault on the Golden Temple has been one of the most traumatic events in India’s history since Independence.”¹⁴⁹ A Cabinet briefing paper said that “There were very heavy casualties in the fighting within the Golden Temple complex. ... The central shrine seems to have suffered considerable damage – this may further inflame Sikh religious sentiments.”¹⁵⁰

The backlash was instantaneous. The Indian High Commission in central London was attacked by “8 to 10 Sikhs armed with iron chains”, causing three diplomatic staff to be hospitalised.¹⁵¹ Days later in Birmingham, there was more violence. The files show that “There was a rowdy demonstration in the afternoon of 8 June outside the assistant commission in Birmingham. At least one petrol bomb was thrown, and 2 policemen received serious injuries.”¹⁵² Officials were beginning to panic, as arson attacks spread. One commented that, “we are gravely concerned about the wider Sikh backlash here, and the threat of communal violence. During the night of 7/8 June a milk bottle filled with petrol was thrown into the Air India office in Birmingham, and set it ablaze.”

Serious plots began to be reported. The Indian High Commission warned the FCO in mid-June that a group like *Dal Khalsa* might send a suicide bomber to hijack an Air India flight, remarking that, “a hijacker may, as a passenger, try to carry explosives in his baggage and thereby even risk getting himself killed while at the same time destroying the aircraft.”¹⁵³ Efforts to connect with major terrorist organisations were alleged, with Special Branch warned that Sikhs in Southall planned to ask the IRA or other groups for help blowing up the Indian High Commission.¹⁵⁴ By the end of June 1984, enhance security on Air India flights was costing the company an

149 FCO 37/3611

150 FCO 37/3606, F56 7 June 1984

151 FCO 37/3606, F41, 5 June 1984

152 FCO 37/3607, F98

153 FCO 37/3608, F143A, 15 June 1984

154 FCO 37/3610, F176, 22 June 1984

additional £5000 per week.¹⁵⁵

In July 1984, MI5 was warned that Sikhs had allegedly carried out a reconnaissance of the Indian High Commission building in London, and that *Dal Khalsa* was plotting an explosion - "they are likely to try to smuggle plastic explosive for this purpose into the visa section".¹⁵⁶

One of the most serious incidents came in late July 1984, when the Southall offices of Sandesh International, a Punjabi-language paper that supported the Indian government, caught fire. Police suspected it was an arson attack. Mr Kartar Singh Tar, a journalist for the publication, suffered 13% burns and later died from his injuries.¹⁵⁷ Special Branch said "there is a possibility that this might be the result of action by militant Sikhs", however their report into the incident has been entirely censored.¹⁵⁸ At the end of July 1984, security chiefs were told that the "Possibility of Sikh extremists in this country planning some form of violence remains very real."¹⁵⁹ It is concerning that the Heywood Review did not inform Parliament that SAS advisory support for Indira Gandhi's plan to raid Amritsar ultimately raised the terrorism threat to Britain.



Sikhs protest outside the Indian High Commission central London



155 FCO 37/3610, F212 25 June 1984
156 FCO 37/3611, F225 10 July 1984
157 FCO 37/3611, F262 25 July 1984
158 FCO 37/3611, F272, 25 July 1984
159 FCO 37/3613, F274, 24 July 1984

10. More SAS advice considered for India after Amritsar massacre

Even though the impact of SAS advice to India in February had been a patent failure, causing a collapse in peace talks and encouraging a military strategy which increased the potential terror threat to Britain, Whitehall considered further SAS assistance for India just weeks after the Amritsar massacre. Censorship prevents the public from knowing whether this assistance went ahead, although the mere existence of a file on this matter from 1984 that has been retained in its entirety by the FCO and not released to the Archives strongly suggests assistance was provided. On 20 July 2017 it was also revealed another file on the same subject from 1985 also existed, but was not released. SAS assistance is particularly concerning, because it is the regiment in the British army with particular counter-insurgency and irregular warfare experience, having fought a covert war in Oman for much of the 1970s and then in Northern Ireland.¹⁶⁰

By the end of June 1984, the MOD had received an "Indian request for military assistance in the setting up of a National Guard for internal Security duties".¹⁶¹ The FCO's Security Co-ordination Unit (SCU) was asked to "comment on the possibility of an SAS involvement." These comments were made in a cover letter, and the related correspondence is missing from the very slender file at the Archives. This paper was clearly released in error, as Sir Alex Allan's review published in August 2014 had explicitly stated that references to the SAS should be censored.

The letter was written by J.C.J. Ramsden of the FCO's South Asia Department. This appears to be the same John Ramsden who now sits on the Advisory Council on National Records and Archives when it signed off on the widespread censorship of the FCO's India files from 1984. The letter was copied to Bruce Cleghorn, who has also been involved in censoring this batch of files in recent years.

Another official named in the correspondence was Michael Legge, who appears to have been head of the MOD's 'Defence Secretariat 11'.¹⁶² Legge is referred to in the Clive Ponting affair – Ponting was an MOD whistle-blower who was arrested in August 1984 for leaking documents to an MP about the sinking of the Argentine warship *Belgrano* in the Falkland's War. Those documents included an internal memo written by Legge, in which he admitted that the rules of engagement permitting an attack on Argentine warships in that area did not come into effect until a week after the *Belgrano*'s sinking.¹⁶³

The other available archival material makes no reference to this possible SAS involvement, so we do not know whether it was provided or not. However, the timing of this correspondence is highly disturbing, coming just weeks after the atrocities at Amritsar. It shows that Whitehall was at this time contemplating SAS assistance to Indian forces. This makes a mockery of the Heywood Review's portrayal of the February 1984 SAS assistance as an isolated episode with limited impact.

Moreover, the unit that Whitehall was considering training appears to be the Indian National Security Guard (NSG), an elite counter-terrorism force nicknamed the 'Black Cats' that was formed in July 1984. Its official website states that "The NSG was modelled on the pattern of the SAS". The British High Commission told Geoffrey Howe on 5 July 1984 that the Indian government "are said to be thinking of forming a new para-military National Guard with specific responsibility for combating internal terrorism."¹⁶⁴

Files about the NSG from 1984 and 1985 have been retained in their entirety by the FCO and not released to the Archives. The National Security Guard went on to attack the *Sri Harmandir Sahib* in 1986 and 1988 as part of Operations Black Thunder I and II. The NSG also led further assaults in Punjab such as Operation Black Hawk, a heliborne operation in 1988, and Operation Mouse Trap in 1989. It is highly unusual for the government to keep files on specific foreign military units, and its existence will add to suspicions that the SAS was involved in training them.

160 For details of SAS operation in Oman, see Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, Oxford, 2013

161 FCO 37/3662, F10, 3 July 1984

162 The MOD should clarify the function of Defence Secretariat 11.

163 See for example 'Navy blocks release of documents on *Belgrano* sinking', *Guardian*, 27 June 2005, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/jun/27/freedomofinformation.military>

164 FCO 37/3611, F265, 6 July 1984

The cover letter puts serious doubt on the claim that then Foreign Secretary William Hague made to Parliament on 4 February 2014 when he published the Heywood Review. Hague claimed that, “One of the questions raised is whether there could have been British military involvement in subsequent Operations Black Thunder I and II. From everything that the Cabinet Secretary has seen, having examined hundreds of files—200 files—the answer to that is no.”

If Britain did help set up and provide training to the NSG, it would have done so knowing that such a move risked undermining India's democracy even further. In late July 1984, the Foreign Office observed “a steady increase in the size of the para-military forces available to the central government and, now, with plans to create yet another such force, a National Guard. ... increasing use of the military arm does seem to place India's traditional democratic polity in jeopardy.”¹⁶⁵

There is already ample evidence that the Heywood Review was inadequate or even deliberately misleading and that an independent public inquiry is required in order to fully understand Britain's involvement in Operation Blue Star. The remainder of this report contends that any subsequent British support for India's repression of Sikhs has to be investigated independently as well.



Indian National Security Guard (NSG) Aka Black Cats

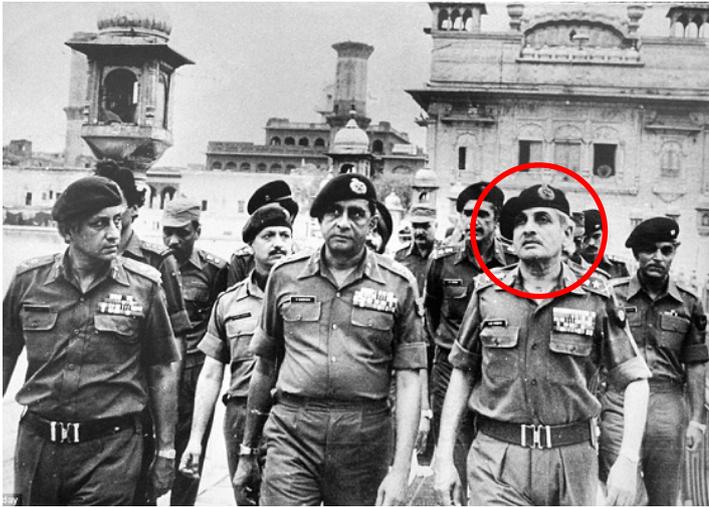


Operation Black Thunder, Amritsar 1988

165 FCO 37/3613, F279, 27 July 1984

11. Para-trooper training, armoured vehicles and night vision technology after Amritsar massacre

In late July 1984, the Indian army asked Britain about “para operations”, presumably a reference to paratrooper training. The Indian Chief of Army Staff was scheduled to discuss “para operations” with General Howlett in September.¹⁶⁶ The British High Commission tried to establish which training detachments might be of interest to the Indian army in this regard. Any further correspondence about this issue is missing from the file. The Indian Army's Parachute Regiment includes a special forces 'para' unit which specialises in counter-insurgency and was involved in Operation Blue Star, even clearing wells around the holy site with divers.



Indian Army Chief General Vaidya (who also led Op Bluestar)

By August 1984, the British High Commission had received firm interest from Indian para-military forces in the supply of armoured vehicles, for either 20 of the 'Saxons' or 'Amac' variety. It is not clear if the sales went ahead, but even after the Amritsar massacre the Foreign Office remained eager to supply India with internal security equipment. John Ramsden, then at the South Asia Department, summarised the debate as follows:

“We would have to look very carefully at any application to export the vehicles to these countries on a larger scale (but would not rule out agreeing to this). Applications for export to Syria and Chile have already been turned down. The main criterion for deciding applications is whether the vehicles might be used for internal repression.

“Both AMAC and SAXON are formidable vehicles. They have features, e.g. AMAC's electric shock capability and SAXON's machine gun cupola, which are likely to attract particular public concern. This is the first time that we have been asked to approve the export of these vehicles in significant numbers, and for operational deployment as opposed to promotional purposes. A decision to approve the application would almost certainly excite controversy here, particularly against the background of the present troubles in Punjab and Kashmir.

“To help us to evaluate this application grateful for your comments on the likely use the Indians would make fit the vehicles. We need to bear in mind the possibility of a strong reaction from sections of the Indian community here, e.g. Sikhs, if the vehicles were to be deployed against their people in India. We also need to evaluate the likely Indian reaction if the application is turned down.”¹⁶⁷

The potential Saxon sale was worth £2m, and the Amac deal some £4.5m. Specification photos of the Amac detail that it had 16 grenade launchers, 18 gun ports, a 7,000-volt electrical charge running through exterior, high pressure water cannon, and an infra-red camera. It was not promoted for use in Britain. India's para-military forces had become interested in the Amac “following [a] demonstration given in sidelines of BAEE”, the British Army Equipment Exhibition in June 1984.

The FCO's Defence Department wanted to refuse supply of this equipment to India, strongly advising “not [to] approve applications for items of equipment which may be used for internal repression. These vehicles come into this category.”¹⁶⁸ However, another official scribbled in the margin that “India is a democracy and, the acts of individuals apart, internal repression is not Government policy. The availability of these vehicles would enable the security authorities to raise the threshold when the use of force becomes necessary. Not all demonstrations in India are political. There are all too frequent bloody communal riots when the security forces have a peacekeeping role to fulfil. These vehicles would facilitate their work. I recommend that we approve supply.”

166 FCO 37/3662, UK training assistance to India, 1984, telex dated 31 July 1984, folio 11, page 19 of pdf

167 FCO 37/3671, F110, 13 August 1984

168 FCO 37/3671, F110, 7 August 1984



British made Saxon armed vehicles

The portrayal of India's para-military forces as neutral parties in situations of inter-communal violence is not substantiated by another FCO briefing for the Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe just a month earlier, where it was acknowledged that "Outside para-military forces drafted into Punjab tended to be pro-Hindu."¹⁶⁹

Having considered the arguments, Howe was in favour of supplying the Saxon, noting that no applications had been refused in the past, with Nigeria receiving 75 of the armoured vehicles. Howe told British diplomats in Delhi that:

"The main criterion in considering such applications is whether the vehicles might be used for internal repression, particularly where the country concerned has a bad human rights record. India hardly falls into such a category but we should need to be sure of our grounds before agreeing to the export of AMAC.

"Both AMAC and SAXON are formidable vehicles, the former particularly so given its electric shock capability. ... An application for SAXON would be more difficult to reject since it has already been exported in large numbers to other countries."

He added:

"We also need to evaluate the likely GOI reaction if either application is turned down, and the implications this might have for other Defence Sales prospects."

Later that year, the Foreign Office made no objection to the sale of thermal imaging equipment to India and Sri Lanka, as fitted to puma helicopters in Northern Ireland. Clearly this equipment would be useful for dealing with insurgency situations.¹⁷⁰

The UK government's willingness to train and equip India's counter-insurgency forces in the aftermath of the Amritsar massacre means that the Heywood Review's focus on the single event of Operation Bluestar is inadequate. That attack marked the start of a decade long armed conflict throughout which the Indian state, Britain's ally, perpetrated human rights abuses against Sikhs.

The UN's Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth criticised the British government in November 2016 for adopting such an "event-based" approach to the Troubles.¹⁷¹ He warned that the conflict in Northern Ireland was not "simply the aggregate of isolated events." He recommended that, "The structural and systemic dimensions of violence and rights violations and abuses should be examined. A comprehensive understanding of the past requires instruments that do not treat it merely as a series of unconnected events." This UN advice should also be heeded when investigating Britain's involvement in India's repression of Sikhs.



¹⁶⁹ FCO 37/3611, 6 July 1984

¹⁷⁰ FCO 37/3672, F170. 30 October 1984

¹⁷¹ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence on his mission to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 17 November 2016

12. UK curtailed Sikh civil rights to lift Indian trade boycott

Britain's close alliance with Indira Gandhi was beginning to pay dividends. During July 1984, the files indicate that Westlands finally won the helicopter contract, and that by August that year the company was proceeding on the basis that it had won the deal, although contract negotiations on technical details continued into October 1984.¹⁷² However, the UK was about to suffer a remarkable change of fortunes. Westlands was due to sign the contract on 31 October 1984, the very day that Indira Gandhi was assassinated. This put the whole deal in jeopardy, as her grieving son, Rajiv, wanted vengeance against Sikhs everywhere, including in the UK, where he believed the British government was turning a blind eye to their activities. If British trade with India under his mother's administration benefited from sharing counter-insurgency assistance in Amritsar, then under Rajiv Gandhi's tenure British exports were boycotted until restrictions were put on Sikh activists in the UK, a development which had serious human rights implications. Freedom of expression for British Sikhs was curtailed, with religious marches banned. Sikh asylum-seekers were refused sanctuary and deported, resulting in them being tortured in India. Intelligence was received from India, which raises concerns about whether British agencies like MI5 used information that was extracted under torture by foreign interrogators.

To a limited extent, this appeasement was already taking place in the months prior to Mrs Gandhi's assassination. Decisions on asylum were being influenced by the Indian government's concerns about Sikh activists in the UK. The British High Commission commented in April 1984 that "against this background of 'foreign hand' allegations that we need to assess the impact here of any decision to grant political asylum to Sikh extremists."¹⁷³ This was in reference to Jaswant Singh Thekedar who, having fled to the UK in 1983 and at that time was a member of *Dal Khalsa*, was allegedly involved in radicalising members into seeking to acquire weapons and training.

In a confidential telegram from Geoffrey Howe to the British High Commission in Delhi it stated that on the afternoon of 7 June 1984 the High Commissioner, called at the Home Office and asked "whether the police could take Sikh leaders into preventative detention, and handed a list of candidates. These turned out to be leaders of Sikh Temples".

Indian authorities were passing intelligence to the British government, as shown by this comment from May 1984 that "Indian intelligence is in general reliable and we believe that they will be careful to maintain their credibility."¹⁷⁴ Intelligence sharing increased after the Amritsar massacre. Minutes from a meeting between the British High Commission and Rasgotra on 8 June 1984 stated that:

"The Indian authorities had a great deal of information about the extremist groups. I said this made it all the more important that the Indian authorities should let us have through the appropriate channels the fullest possible flow of the information at their disposal. Rasgotra instructed Gaury Shankar (MEA security) to ensure that all relevant information was passed on."¹⁷⁵

In that same meeting, the Indian foreign affairs official complained about the inadequate security Britain was providing to his diplomatic staff in London, and said that in a recent demonstration against the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi, Indian authorities had shot dead two demonstrators. The chilling implication was that Indian officials expected British police to be just as lethal when dealing with Sikh protestors.

Days later, the Home Office gave Special Branch some intelligence on Sikh activists that probably originated from India. The document is censored and there is no indication of how this intelligence was obtained:

"Mr Sen [IHC] said that he had information (it was not clear where it came from, but he implied that it was from India rather than the UK) that three committees were being set up amongst Sikhs in the UK. The first committee would have the task of taking violent action against Hindus and Sikhs loyal to the Indian Government. The second would undertake violent attacks upon the High Commission and other property connected with the Indian Govt – Air India was specifically mentioned. The third would be concerned to raise money for terrorist attacks in India."¹⁷⁶

172 The archival material is suspiciously thin from August 1984 until Indira Gandhi's assassination at the end of October 1984. Thereafter, the files cover her assassination but hold a very small amount of documentation on the pogroms.

173 FCO 37/3584, F85, 27 April 1984

174 FCO 37/3606, F26, 24 May 1984

175 FCO 37/3607, F90, 8 June 1984

176 FCO 37/3607, F112, 12 June 1984

This co-operation only increased after Indira Gandhi's assassination in October 1984. Thatcher was deeply upset on a personal level, sending a condolence message to her son, Rajiv Gandhi, expressing her profound sorrow. "I cannot describe to you my feelings at the news of the loss of your mother, except to say that it was like losing a member of my own family," she wrote.¹⁷⁷ That same day, Whitehall was warned of the enfolding pogroms of Sikhs, in a telex from the High Commission in New Delhi, which said that "there are already reports of rioting and attacks on Sikhs in Delhi and other cities."¹⁷⁸ It was clear that India was entering a new epoch, and Whitehall had to decide where its interests lay.



Sikhs suffering in mass state sponsored genocide in Delhi and across India, November 1984

A telegram from British diplomats, dated 1 November 1984 and titled "Assassination of Mrs Gandhi: business implications", noted that "Government offices are unlikely, while being functional next week, to make major decisions ... [the Indians] will probably delay signature of the Westlands agreement"¹⁷⁹. As the genocide unfolded, Whitehall's focus was on maintaining the Westland's helicopter deal. There was concern that France could clinch the Westland deal in the absence of Indira Gandhi's personal support:

*"The Prime Minister may wish to be aware that Westlands had negotiated an order for 27 Westland 30 helicopters for use in oil rig support with one of the Indian Government agencies. The order, which is backed by ODA finance, was due to be signed this month with delivery taking place over the next 12 months. The helicopters are already part built. The order had Mrs Gandhi's backing and unless this backing continues at a high level it is possible that the French will intervene and the order will be lost."*¹⁸⁰

Although the files, tellingly, contain more correspondence on the business situation than on the humanitarian cost, the FCO was well aware that a tragedy that was taking place in Delhi: riots, arson, looting and sacrilege of *Gurdwaras*. British diplomats reported that there was:

*"Violence in various towns in northern India. The authorities are taking strict measures to try to maintain control. ... widespread rioting and arson in north and south Delhi ... Sis Ganj Gurdwara, one of the most important Sikh temples in Delhi, has been burnt and the main Sikh market looted: other Gurdwaras have also been attacked."*¹⁸¹

They noted correctly that "last night's anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and elsewhere seem to have been fairly severe", but

177 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p181 of pdf

178 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p170 of pdf

179 OD 27/420, Aid for Westlands Helicopters, October 1984 - November 1984. Letter dated 1 November 1984, page 7 of pdf

180 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p167 of pdf, Helicopters for India 1 November 1984.

181 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, pp161-162 of pdf. 1 November 1984. BHC Delhi to FCO London. Subject: Law and order situation.

concluded with massive understatement that only “a number of casualties have been reported.”¹⁸² The highest levels of Whitehall were engaged in this issue, with the Joint Intelligence Committee making its own assessment on 31 October, however it is missing from the Archives.¹⁸³

Following the assassination, Indian authorities ratcheted up their campaign against Dr Chauhan, urging Britain to ban free expression and assembly of Sikhs in the UK. On 2 November, British Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe, met the Indian High Commissioner in London to discuss the “various steps we are taking to discourage inflammatory statements by Sikh extremists [sic]”. The Indian diplomat claimed that “Chauhan had now admitted that he had had contact with a secret organisation charged with the task of assassinating Mrs Gandhi: surely this was sufficient reason to charge him with complicity in the murder?” Despite representing the world's largest 'democracy', the Indian official complained without irony that Sikhs were allowed to demonstrate outside the High Commission in London and that the British media reported Sikh statements. Howe agreed to ask the police to monitor Chauhan's statements in the local vernacular press, and informed him of the Home Secretary's decision to ban marches in the London borough of Ealing until 12 November, to “prevent any Sikh celebration in the area”. By contrast, a Hindu commemoration of Indira Gandhi was allowed to take place elsewhere in London.¹⁸⁴

The ensuing focus on Chauhan was disproportionate, repressive and at times cruel. Whitehall had read a report months earlier that “implies that there is a good deal of opposition to Dr Chauhan's pretensions to play a leading part in the Sikh movement in this country.”¹⁸⁵ Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe himself told colleagues that “There are no conditions on the length of his stay here ... He is not subject to any control under the immigration act.”¹⁸⁶ In September 1984, Dr Chauhan had written a desperate letter to the British government, warning that his sick wife, Charanjit Kaur, had been stopped from leaving India, although she was a UK resident seeking to return. She urgently needed kidney treatment and was suffering a serious infection. His appeal fell on deaf ears.¹⁸⁷



BBC Chairman Stuart Young (1984)

Chauhan's media appearances were of more concern to the British government, especially since Dr Chauhan had made remarks on BBC Radio 4, in the aftermath of the Amritsar massacre, where he appeared to call for Indira Gandhi's killing.¹⁸⁸ Following her assassination, the BBC Chairman responded to pressure from Thatcher, giving the BBC's assistant director-general “strict instructions that Mr Chohan [sic] should not be invited to broadcast on BBC without special clearance being obtained from him. Such clearance has not been given.”¹⁸⁹ From 2 November, Whitehall began compiling press statements by Dr Chauhan. A telex that day from British diplomats in Delhi made clear that trade itself was at stake, warning London that “feeling in very senior Indian government circles (including the new Prime Minister) is running

very high against Britain in the light of reports of Chauhan's appearances on the BBC and of Sikh rejoicings in London. There is even talk of a trade boycott, including the cancellation of existing defence contracts.” The government was advised to make high-level public statements against Chauhan and celebrations by Sikhs.¹⁹⁰ Discussions around the legal barriers to Chauhan's extradition were held.

Indira Gandhi's funeral was becoming a highly political affair, with Thatcher's attendance designed to “give the lie to those in India who allege British sympathy for Sikh extremism.”¹⁹¹ Anticipating a meeting with US Secretary of State George Shultz at the funeral, Thatcher was briefed to say that the Indian government “have been slow to respond to initial Hindu-Sikh rioting”, however she expected them to “grip situation in next few days.” She was to acknowledge that there was “No indication that assassination was part of wider attempt to overthrow

182 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, pp159-160. 1 November 1984. BHC Delhi to FCO London. Subject: Aftermath of Mrs Gandhi's death.

183 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p72. 1 November 1984. FCO to Downing Street, subject: Mrs Gandhi's Funeral.

184 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, pp153-154. 2 November 1984. FCO London to BHC Delhi. Subject: UK Sikh reaction to Mrs Gandhi's murder

185 FCO 37/3610, F194, 2 July 1984

186 FCO 37/3613 Sikh agitation, F277, 31 July 1984

187 FCO 37/3595, September 1984

188 FCO 37/3607, F117, 12 June 1984.

189 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p150. 2 November 1984.

190 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p147. 2 November 1984. BHC Delhi to FCO London.

191 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p109.



Indira Gandhi's funeral 3 November 1984

Government”, but that “In longer terms, likely Sikh dissidence will continue in Punjab.”¹⁹² She was informed of the “widespread rioting in Delhi and other cities. Sikh shops have been looted and Sikh temples attacked.” Despite this, she was briefed negatively on the Sikh community and told to promote arms sales and military training if she encounters any Indian government ministers. The latter points were listed side by side, a sign of the linkage that governed Whitehall's thinking by this stage:

“Sikh community in the UK (if raised). Fully understand your concern. Deplore disgraceful scenes by Sikh extremists [sic] in UK. Majority of Sikhs in UK are sensible people. Many moderate Sikh leaders have appealed for calm. Senior police officers have been in touch with Sikh community leaders to stress the need to stay within the law. We cannot control the media but have urged them to exercise care ... No foreign extremists, including Sikhs, will be allowed to break the law.

Commercial relations – defence sales_ Encouraged by strong recent growth of trade in both directions. Important to sustain this. Co-operation in defence equipment field has been particularly fruitful. Co-operation between our armed forces over training and equipment is in interest of both countries. Hope it will continue and expand.”¹⁹³

Whitehall planners noted that India was the “Largest developing country market if Saudi Arabia is excluded”, with UK exports to India worth £805m. The memo set out “Major recent contracts”, again mentioning the helicopter deal. “Westlands are in the final stages of negotiating a contract for the sale of W30 helicopters (contract value GBP65m 100% aid financed).” It valued total defence sales since 1975 at £1.28bn, making India:

“One of the best potential sales markets. A decision on a contract for a major new artillery piece is near. The British FH70 is a strong contender. Total contract value GBP800m. Although FH70 has all the qualities required by the Indian Army the competition is strong and political intervention may be required in support of it. The Indians are interested in a follow-on purchase of 11 Sea Harriers (contract value GBP200m approx). We have no competition here.”¹⁹⁴



Vickers supplied 155mm howitzers

Artillery was still on the agenda despite heavy shelling of the Golden Temple back in June (Indeed, the MOD had had no objection to British arms manufacturer Vickers supplying 155mm howitzers to the Indian army in February 1984 before the massacre¹⁹⁵). Training was flagged up again, as Thatcher was advised to tell her Indian counter parts that the UK would “welcome recent growth in defence sales, and support close links between our armed forces, e.g. for training.”¹⁹⁶

Just two days after the assassination, and as the pogroms continued, the British Foreign Secretary sent a telegram to his High Commissioner in New Delhi, titled 'UK Sikh reaction to Mrs Gandhi's murder'. It made clear that commercial and military trade deals were paramount. Howe said:

“We take very seriously your information about possible retaliatory action by GOI [Government of India] and are now considering what might be done to fend off or limit any damage to our commercial and defence interests. There is obviously a wide area of vulnerability, and the Westlands helicopter contract might, in particular, offer a handy Achilles heel if the Indians were so minded.”¹⁹⁷

192 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, pp125-126

193 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, pp132-135. 2 November 1984.

194 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, pp106-108

195 FCO 37/3669, F28, 29 February 1984

196 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, pp104-105

197 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p68. 2 November 1984. Howe to Wade-Gery. Subject UK Sikh reaction to Mrs

On 3 November, the FCO highlighted recent press statements by Dr Chauhan in which he talked about the inevitability of Sikhs wanting revenge. Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary, said that:

*“The Home Office are in touch with the police asking them to consider urgently whether these latest statements involve the commission of any criminal offence. Their initial impression however, is that once again Chauhan has been careful to avoid using words which would justify prosecution, however offensive his remarks may be.”*¹⁹⁸

When Thatcher was in New Delhi for the funeral, she met the Indian tycoon Swraj Paul at the High Commission. Mr Paul was a close confidant of the Gandhi family. A redacted note from their meeting shows that they discussed Dr Chauhan's comments on the BBC, stressing that the BBC was independent of the British government and lamenting that “this was not an easy point to get across in India.” The misgivings were so high that “Indian politicians had been talking of a trade boycott against Britain.” Optimistically, it noted that “Mrs Thatcher's statement on 2 November, condemning the behaviour of Dr Chauhan and his associates, had had an extremely beneficial effect and appeared to have defused the crisis. *Mr Gandhi had seen the text of that statement that same night and had been much relieved.*”¹⁹⁹ [emphasis added] In a sign of Thatcher's continued support for the embattled family, she “expressed her affection for Mr Gandhi, her admiration for the way he had conducted himself since the assassination, and her confidence in his political future.”

A week after the assassination, on 8 November, the BBC Director-General wrote a letter to Indian High Commissioner, apologising for broadcasting an interview with Dr Chauhan and signalling that the free expression of Sikhs in the UK had been curtailed:

*“I know that the interviewing of Dr Jagjit Singh Chauhan on Radio London on 31 October has caused particular dismay and anger. I regret very much that Dr Chauhan's claim to be a representative of the Khalistan government and, indeed, his status within the Sikh community, was not challenged within the programme: and I share the distaste of senior representatives of the Indian government at the sentiments expressed by him, and I have made clear my reservations about the wisdom of carrying the interview at all. May I assure you that there is no question of Dr Chauhan being invited to broadcast again without the personal permission of my Assistant Director-General”.*²⁰⁰

Measures against Sikhs were also discussed by Thatcher's Cabinet. They were told that, “The possibility of instituting legal proceedings against Dr Chauhan was being urgently considered but it was clear that Dr Chauhan himself had access to very competent legal advice.”²⁰¹



Guru Nanak Gurburb (Birthday) Nagar Kirtan (procession)

Even Sikh religious festivals were being identified as a threat, with the Indian High Commission warning Whitehall that a traditional Sikh march to celebrate Guru Nanak Gurburb (the birthday of the founder of the Sikh faith), “would have a most severe effect on relations between the United Kingdom and India.” The Foreign Secretary said indignantly that, “It was not acceptable that the quarrels of India should be transferred to the streets of London ... manifestations [demonstrations] by Sikhs in the United Kingdom could have a serious effect on relations with India, including trade.” The fact that he had involved Britain's

special forces in the 'quarrels of India' appears to have been forgotten.

Gandhi's murder

198 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p26. 3 November 1984. FCO London to BHC Delhi.

199 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp308-310. Note of meeting between Thatcher and Swraj Paul at BHC Delhi 4 November 1984.

200 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p20. 3 November 1984, pp12-13. 8 November 1984.

201 CAB 128/79/13, 8 November 1984

The *Guru Nanak Gurpurab* event which had been planned for 18 November was banned. The matter was discussed in stark terms at Cabinet level, with a trade boycott feared if the march went ahead: "Sikh custom did not require that the religious anniversary should be marked with marches: the occasion could properly be celebrated in Sikh Gurdwaras. In view of the importance of the British political and commercial interests at stake, it would be necessary to explore every possibility of preventing the march from taking place."²⁰²



1984 Remembrance March and Freedom Rally, central London

At another Cabinet meeting a week later, it was clearly stated that Sikh activity in the UK "posed a serious risk: export contracts worth £5 billion could be at stake. The march by Sikhs in Central London, which had been due to take place on 18 November [Guru Nanak's birthday] had been banned."²⁰³ If any Sikhs did assemble at London's Hyde Park, the police would aim to avoid "provoking them into heading off towards the Indian High Commission", demonstrating that appeasing Indian sensibilities and promoting trade, even in the wake of the Delhi pogroms, remained paramount.²⁰⁴ The evidence for this argument is abundant from the available files. On 23 November, the High Commissioner sent a telex to the FCO in London titled "Chauhan" that said:

"My commercial counsellor has heard from a reliable source that the Prime Minister, addressing a meeting of (Permanent) Secretaries last week, spoke of certain countries (including the US, FRG [West Germany] and UK) who were being 'insufficiently sympathetic' to India's problems with Sikh extremists abroad. Rajiv Gandhi reportedly said that no financing offers for major contracts from these countries were to be entertained in the near future unless there was a change of attitude. He thought that such a change might be possible in the case of Britain.

... I believe we should take this seriously. ... In the medium term however I do believe there could be a threat to our prospects on major defence and civilian contracts where we might otherwise be well placed politically, financially and technically if at the Prime Minister's level ... there is a perception that HMG is not taking the Chauhan problem seriously enough."²⁰⁵

202 CAB 128/79/14, 15 November 1984

203 CAB 128/79/15, 22 November 1984

204 PREM 19/1663 Assassination of Indira Gandhi October 1984 – December 1984, p9. 16 November 1984. Memo to Thatcher from Powell, subject: Sikh Demonstration.

205 OD 27/420, Aid for Westlands Helicopters, October 1984 - November 1984. Letter dated 23 November 1984, page 15 of pdf

There were two further telexes on 26 November 1984 with the subject "Chauhan". In one, the High Commissioner reminded London that:

"Besides the Westland Helicopter contract with ONGC ...[there are] a number of important defence contracts which we hope will be signed before the election viz:

*BAE Sea Harrier second buy
Westland Helicopter Sea King spares (40 million pounds)
Westland Commando Helicopters (12 million pounds)
SLM sub-marine control simulators (6 million pounds)."*²⁰⁶

Whitehall's concerns about the threat Chauhan posed to British business in India increased. British diplomats in New Delhi advised London on 10 December that:

"It is now clear ... that government departments here have been warned off concluding major contracts with Britain in present circumstances. ... We are getting more and more reports that the dissatisfaction over Chauhan is souring the atmosphere for our business prospects: and that it centres in Rajiv Gandhi's political entourage and more generally in the higher reaches of the Congress (I) Party. The latest and clearest comes from a well-placed and well-disposed business contact ... He had been talking to a member of Rajiv's political household and had found them in an ugly mood. They were sure that if we chose we could find some way of preventing a man like Chauhan doing so much damage to India. Our attitude must therefore represent culpable negligence if not deliberate malice.

*My contact, who is well informed on defence sales issues, went on to say that as a result of our considerable recent efforts our chances of securing the huge contract for 155mm field howitzer had been beginning to brighten. But the Indian Ministry of Defence were now clear that advice to buy British would be unwelcome at the political level, and specifically to the Prime Minister's entourage. The Indian system being what it was, they would therefore not recommend our gun unless things had changed by the time the decision came to be taken after the elections. As things stand we have no specific evidence of danger to other pending contracts such as the WE 30 Helicopter deal, but we cannot rule this out."*²⁰⁷ (Highlighting as in the original)

A third dispatch from that same day warned again that perceived inaction over Chauhan posed a major threat to British business:

*"Rajiv Gandhi's entourage are extremely angry with us. ...[They are] driven by a real fear that our inaction having already been in their belief, substantiated or not, a contributory factor to the murder of Mrs Gandhi, is continuing to contribute materially to the danger of Rajiv being similarly killed. They believe his early death would endanger India's national survival. They are convinced we could find some way of acting against Chauhan if we really wanted to. They have ordered the MEA to apply political and economic pressures to bring us to that pitch. In pursuit of this the MEA have ordered all government departments to consult them before undertaking any important contracts with us. Whatever we say, we shall not alter this stage of affairs unless and until we do take what is accepted as effective action. ... We must also reckon that there is an odds-on chance of an attempt being made on Rajiv's life in the next few months, probably by Sikhs, and that, if this happens while we are still tolerating Chauhan, the effect on all our interests here could be catastrophic. Lives and property could be lost as well as contracts and influence. ... We therefore need to ask ourselves whether, in the absence of new evidence against Chauhan, there are any circumstances in which we would feel obliged to do something about him ...I must leave you in no doubt of the dangerous and damaging consequences of doing nothing."*²⁰⁸

206 OD 27/420, Aid for Westlands Helicopters, October 1984 - November 1984. Letter dated 26 November 1984, pages 17-18 of pdf

207 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 - May 1985, pp287-288. 10 December 1984. BHC Delhi to FCO London - subject: Chauhan [2]

208 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 - May 1985, pp285-286. 10 December 1984. BHC Delhi to FCO London - subject: Chauhan. [3]



Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi with Margaret Thatcher on UK visit

A potential visit by Rajiv Gandhi to Britain was welcomed by the FCO on the grounds that it would “demonstrate our confidence in Mr Gandhi's re-election, and might win us some goodwill from the Indians (who, as you know, have been threatening economic action against the British interests for our alleged leniency towards Sikh extremists [sic] in this country).”²⁰⁹

The Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe, warned Thatcher that, “We have had several discussions in Cabinet recently on the damage which the activities of Sikh extremists [sic] in this country could do to British interests in India. This is part of a wider problem of controlling foreign political activists in this country.” Again, Chauhan's threat to £5 billion of business contracts was singled out:

“The case of Chauhan and his supporters presents a problem of particular urgency and gravity, because of the potential damage they can cause to the very considerable British interests at stake in India. Sir R Wade-Gery in New Delhi has been reporting in worrying terms that Indian Government departments have been instructed not to conclude major contracts with Britain. They have postponed a visit by Michael Heseltine and may well do the same with a visit by Norman Lamont. The Society of British Aircraft Constructors [SBAC] Exhibitions and Seminar, an important vehicle for defence and technology sales, has suffered the same treatment. Major contracts at risk are worth some £5 billion. The situation is likely to deteriorate quickly unless we can do something to arrest it. ... If we are to prevent serious damage to the whole range of our relations with India, we shall have to be seen to be taking action against Chauhan and his circle.”

Howe thought that denying asylum to Sikhs would be appropriate, despite the risk of persecution they faced in India. In a partially censored comment, he said “I also hope that Leon Brittan will be able to take an early, and negative, decision on the application for asylum by another Sikh extremist, [name redacted] who we know [redaction] has been involved in planning violence in the UK.”²¹⁰

It was in this context that Britain granted India millions of aid for the DESU gas turbine power plant, in which UK firms GEC/Rolls Royce and John Brown Engineering were bidding. Thatcher was asked whether she would agree to support DTI's plan to give a £8.77m aid subsidy to the project. “In present circumstances – Chauhan and all that – it seems to me that our companies are going to need all the help they can get in winning business in India...?” Thatcher's hand written reply read: “Yes – it will be a critical case for us in view of the Chauhan matter.”²¹¹

By 17 December, Downing Street was worried. In a redacted memo to the Home Office, titled Sikh extremists [sic]: damage to Indo-British relations, it said “The Prime Minister is extremely concerned by the situation reported in the Foreign Secretary's minute of 2 December on this subject. ... The Prime Minister is unable to understand the delay in submitting recommendations on the question of control of foreign political activists generally. She wishes these to come forward urgently.”²¹² The minute of 2 December was not available in the file, and a message from Downing Street to the FCO dated 17 December has been removed in its entirety.²¹³

Howe told British diplomats in a telex titled “Westlands/Chauhan” that he had heard the Westlands contract was “held up because HMG either could not or would not take action against Chauhan. There would be no movement until action was taken. This also applied to the SBAC seminar.”²¹⁴ This telegram is copied to a Mr Harrington and Mr Thompson, both identified as “F4, Home Office.” F4 division of the Home Office has been described as a counter-terrorism unit.²¹⁵

209 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p280. 12 December 1984. FCO London to Downing Street. Subject 'Possible visit of Indian Prime Minister to Britain'.

210 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p272-272. 12 December 1984. Geoffrey Howe (FCO) to Thatcher. Subject “Sikh extremists: damage to Indo-British relations”.

211 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p271. 13 December 1984.

212 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p264. 17 December 1984. Downing Street to Home Office. Subject: Sikh extremists [sic]: damage to Indo-British relations

213 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p262. Dummy card: Barclay to [Len] Appleyard [FCO] dated 17 December 1984

214 OD 27/420, Aid for Westlands Helicopters, October 1984 - November 1984. Letter dated 17 November 1984, page 25 of pdf

215 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmjust/1022/102208.htm>

On 18 December 1984, the High Commission telexed London about “Sikh extremists: Westlands Helicopters for ONGC”, commenting that “we learned from Westlands and other sources that the contract will not now be signed until after the elections. We believe that the decision to postpone signature was proposed by the MEA (Ministry of External Affairs) but approved by the Prime Minister: it is the most serious step in the process of exerting pressure on us over Chauhan.”²¹⁶ The same day, the High Commission telexed London about “Sikh Extremists”, reporting that “Although neither the US, Canada or the FRG [West Germany] is a major present or potential supplier of defence equipment to India and none has a major civilian project ripe for decision, it does clearly look as if we are being singled out. This reflects the fact that it is Chauhan about whom Indian opinion is most worked up.”²¹⁷

The concerns about Sikhs persisted as Whitehall prepared for Christmas. On 19 December the Cabinet office complained that it was not in the loop. “[The] subject of Sikh Extremists [sic] ... is of direct interest to the Cabinet Office (both to the OD [Overseas Defence] Secretariat and to the Intelligence staff) and we would appreciate it if we could be sent copies of all further correspondence on the matter.”²¹⁸ The Home Secretary was in no mood for inaction. He said that “Our officials have been examining the practical steps open to us to take action against Chauhan, and his supporters. For these reasons this letter concerns itself only with the three individual cases to which your minute drew attention. Each illustrates clearly what I am empowered to do under the law.” The names of these 3 Sikhs have been censored. He added “I have decided to exclude from this country, on my personal direction, another Sikh, Jasvir [sic] Singh, who claims to be Sant Bhindranwale's nephew. I took this decision on the grounds of his advocacy and support of violence.”²¹⁹

This is a reference to Jasbir Singh Rode, who was indeed the nephew of Sant Bhindranwale, the Sikh that lead the occupation of *Sri Harmandir Sahib*. He had visited the UK in July 1984, where he had helped set up the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) in September 1984. Membership to this organisation, which called for a sovereign Sikh state, reached an estimated 16,000 in 1985.²²⁰ Following the Home Office's decision in December 1984, Rode was deported and shuttled between countries, where he was refused entry, reportedly at the behest of the Indian authorities. He was eventually disembarked in Manila, Philippines, where he was arrested due to an alert from the Indian embassy, which alleged he was involved in Indira Gandhi's assassination. Rode was then held without trial in India until March 1988, when the allegations against him were withdrawn after he was declared the Jathedar of the Akal Takht. During his solitary confinement in India's Sagar jail, he was allegedly physically tortured. His case demonstrates the extent to which the British government was prepared to sacrifice Sikh rights to appease the Indian regime and avert a boycott on arms deals.



Jasbir Singh (India)

This record is closed

Opening date: 01 January 2086

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Reference:	LCO 42/B15
Description:	Jasbir Singh (India)
Date:	1984-1985
Held by:	The National Archives, Kew
Former reference in its original department:	EX 131754/84
Legal status:	Public Record(s)
Closure status:	Closed Or Retained Document, Open Description
Access conditions:	Closed For 100 years
FOI decision date:	2013
Exemption:	Personal information where the applicant is a 3rd party
Record opening date:	01 January 2086

Jasbir Singh Rode founder of the ISYF in the UK in September 1984, whose file remains exceptionally closed for 100 years at the Archives

216 OD 27/420, Aid for Westlands Helicopters, October 1984 - November 1984. Letter dated 18 November 1984, page 27 of pdf

217 OD 27/420, Aid for Westlands Helicopters, October 1984 - November 1984. Letter dated 18 November 1984, page 28 of pdf (This telex refers to an attachment that might not have been in the file.) It must be noted that this correspondence comes from Overseas Development Administration files for 1984, which contain FCO telegrams. However, the actual FCO files from 1984 for India have still not been released to the public. One can expect them to contain much more detailed correspondence about Sikhs.

218 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p260. 19 December 1984. From Cabinet Office. Subject: Sikh Extremists [sic].

219 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p257. 20 December 1984. Letter from Home Secretary. Subject: Sikh extremists [sic]: damage to Indo-British relations

220 Gurharpal Singh, Darsham Singh Tatla, *Sikhs in Britain: The Making of a Community*, p107

Appendix: After 1984

By 1985, it was clear that Indian concerns over Sikh activists in Britain were so severe that any trade with the sub-continent would suffer if the UK was not seen to be taking action against the diaspora. The files point to a particular strategy that Britain developed to appease Indian concerns, although repeated censorship obscures the precise details. British officials, including the Foreign Secretary himself, referred to special co-operation between particular UK and Indian agencies, the names of which are redacted whenever they occur. The attempts at censorship are incomplete however, because much of this redacted correspondence was copied to 'Box 500', an alias for MI5. By a process of deduction therefore, the special co-operation appears to have been between MI5 and Indian intelligence. This was the lever through which Whitehall tried to gain favour with Rajiv Gandhi and win back trade deals.

However it raises serious questions about the nature of any such cooperation with Indian intelligence agencies, because at that time Sikhs suspected of terrorism were being tortured systematically. Often, those who broke under torture were then recruited as informants (so called 'Cats') and sent back into their communities to infiltrate them. Did MI5 train their Indian counter-parts in interrogation techniques or agent running? Did MI5 base any of its actions against Sikhs in the UK on the basis of intelligence that the Indian's had obtained under torture? Again, because these concerns relate to the intelligence agencies, only a public inquiry with full access to national security material will suffice. This section of the report sets out the available archival material from 1985 alongside the experience of the Sikh community in Punjab and the UK at that time, to fully reflect the implications of British policy.

At the outset of 1985, Whitehall was still concerned that the Sikh diaspora posed a threat to British business deals in India. Lord Aldington, the Chair of Westlands, told Thatcher that:



Lord Aldington, Chair of Westlands

*"You have intervened personally for Westland's benefit in two large contracts with India: firstly the Indian Sea King contract, and secondly the contract for 21 Westland 30 helicopters for the Oil and Natural Gas Commission of India. It may appear ungrateful of me, but I must now ask for your further help in view of the decision taken by the Prime Minister of India to stop all contractual negotiations with British firms. I understand this is due to the Indian resentment at statements made by a leading Sikh in Britain concerning the assassination of Mrs Gandhi – a resentment which in many ways I share. Our position is that we were about to sign the Westland 30 contract with ONGC on the date of Mrs Gandhi's assassination... I am sure that only you can persuade Rajiv Gandhi that bitterly though he may feel about some Sikh personalities in Britain and serious though the problems may be for him in India, you too have your problems with the law, and long standing relations between British firms and India should not suffer."*²²¹

Geoffrey Howe, Britain's foreign secretary, was already hard at work trying to establish if trade sanctions against the UK were in force. He asked British diplomats in Delhi to "smoke out the Indian position before we decide on further action... You should refer in particular to the Westland helicopter contract." If there was an embargo, the diplomats were told to say that:

*"we have never sought to understate the seriousness of the problems which both governments face over the behaviour of Sikh extremists [sic] in the UK. You should rehearse the various offers of co-operation which we have made to the Indians over this problem, our action in excluding Jasbir Singh, and our request for Indian assistance which could help us."*²²²

Thatcher began to get frustrated. Upon reading Lord Aldington's letter, she "commented that India is going too far if this contract is not to be signed."²²³

221 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp240-241. 4 January 1985. Letter from Lord Aldington (Chair of Westlands) to Thatcher.

222 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p243. 4 January 1985. Howe to BHC Delhi. Indo-British Relations. It refers to "Para 4 of your Telno 1028"

223 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p239. 7 January 1985. Downing Street to FCO London.

Peaceful protests by Sikhs in the UK continued to be viewed as a nuisance by Whitehall. The Home Office told Downing Street that a protest on 20 January against Jasbir Singh Rode's deportation was:

*"liable to give rise to concern both here and in Delhi. I understand that FCO officials will be meeting the new High Commissioner today when this matter may be raised in discussion. In view of the likelihood that the police will find no reason within the Public Order Act to apply to ban, it may be helpful to record what we know of it, in the hope that the High Commissioner will understand that there is, at present anyway, no evidence that Dr Chauhan is behind the march or that it need be regarded as offensive to the Indian Government."*²²⁴

And yet the Home Office was well aware of the non-violent nature of most diaspora activism at that time, noting that "The police have no reason to believe that the event will give rise to public disorder."²²⁵

The FCO warned Downing Street that the Sikh diaspora continued to jeopardise British trade with India: "Westlands is not the only company experiencing such difficulties. Others, including British Aerospace and GEC, have also reported their concern that the Indian government are discriminating against British firms in retaliation for Sikh extremist [sic] activity in the UK." However, a visit to India by the MOD's head of defence sales Sir James Blyth, was still scheduled to go ahead later in January. Nonetheless, the FCO said:

*"The fact remains that a number of British companies with major business at stake are very concerned about the situation in India, and it is likely that others besides Westlands, will be urging us to intervene with the Indians at the highest level. We are of course following developments very closely; if the situation deteriorates markedly and our fears of an Indian boycott look like being realised, we shall certainly wish to consider the option of an intervention by the Prime Minister with Mr Gandhi. But, as things stand at the moment, the time has not come to deploy that option."*²²⁶

British diplomats hoped that there might be a split within the Indian establishment and offered London two views of the situation. High Commissioner Wade-Gery said:

"The optimistic interpretation (to which I incline) is that the foreign ministry have been gunning for us: took advantage of our unpopularity over Chauhan to force the postponement of SBAC and BNEA as well as ministerial visits: got it agreed that no big business should be done with the British without political clearance: but have now been told by the Prime Minister that commercial sanctions are not in fact to be used against us, at least for the time being, and that the ban on visits is not to extend beyond March in order to avoid appearing discriminatory."

On the other hand, he warned that:

"The pessimistic reading is that the Indians plan to go on harassing us on both fronts (visits and contracts) while denying that there is any Chauhan connection. If so they will continue refusing to sign with Westlands, but will base their refusal on commercial or technical grounds rather than politics. Either way, the foreign ministry's capacity to do us mischief will remain considerable."

A crucial part of the telegram, which details some form of Anglo-Indian cooperation, is censored:

*"even on the optimistic reading we may be on borrowed time. Rajiv Gandhi may be readier to agree with foreign ministry advice on the need to pressure us if the weeks roll by and we still fail to take action. Much will depend on the progress of the cooperation being dealt with [redaction] and on whether we get further Jasbir Singh type cases, and how HMG and the British courts then react. So we could find ourselves back in letter [from ministers] or emissary country before too long."*²²⁷

224 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p231. 10 January 1985. Home Office to Downing Street. Discussion of Sikh demo planned in London by Supreme Council of Sikhs and Sikh Youth Movement (not Khalistan House)

225 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p215. 17 January 1985. Home Office updated Downing Street on "Sikh demonstration – 20 January"

226 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp227-228. 14 January 1985. FCO London to Downing Street.

227 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp224-225 16 January 1985 BHC Delhi to FCO London: Indo-British relations

Such redactions typically obscure references to the intelligence services or special forces. It is plausible that Britain was increasing its intelligence cooperation with India against Sikhs to win favour with Rajiv Gandhi. Such a liaison would raise serious ethical and legal questions about receiving information derived by torture, or sharing information with foreign agencies who used torture, given that India security forces were gravely abusing the human rights of suspected Sikh militants in the Punjab at that time.

Occasionally, the British High Commissioner received favourable signals from his Indian contacts. In mid-January 1985, he reported that:

*"I asked about negotiations for commercial contracts, currently involving the Indian Ministry of Defence. The latter were said by our firms to be saying that they were held up by a political directive related to Chauhan etc. Alexander [an Indian official] said that this was quite wrong. He had checked with the Prime Minister and informed all concerned. The negotiations could go forward in whatever way the negotiations themselves wished. There was no political hold-up and no Chauhan-related input of any kind. Sir James Blyth's visit would be most welcome: he had spoken to the defence secretary about that."*²²⁸

London replied that, "This is encouraging although we may not be out of the woods yet. We shall now have to see how Westlands fare."²²⁹

By February 1985, Whitehall had established that an embargo had been in place previously, and suspected that it might still be in force.²³⁰ The FCO told Downing Street that: "There is now considerable doubt about the validity of the assurances given by Dr Alexander on 16 January that the postponement of Ministerial visits and of commercial negotiations with British firms was not connected with Indian government concern about Sikh extremists in the UK."²³¹ Geoffrey Howe instructed his High Commissioner ahead of a meeting with Indian defence minister Narasimha Rao to mention the "close contacts which have taken place about the Sikh problem on other (and more appropriate) channels". The ambiguity is significant, because MI5 was included on the memo's circulation list. Was MI5 one of the "other (and more appropriate) channels" through which Britain was working closely with India on the Sikh diaspora? This ambiguity comes up again, this time with Wade-Gery reporting in a telex that was copied to MI5:

*"I had half an hour alone with Parthasarathy (acting foreign minister) yesterday evening. We spent most of the time on Chauhan and Westlands. ... He seemed fully aware both of Alexander's mid-January assurances and of the extent of cooperation [redacted] he acknowledged. Without endorsing, the school of thought which existed in some GOI quarters to the effect that pressure on contracts should be used to try to make Britain more cooperative over Chauhan and co."*²³²

Howe repeated his cryptic instructions to Wade-Gery ahead of his meeting with Rao, stressing Thatcher's personal involvement. "The Prime Minister is following personally the exchanges about the supply of Westlands helicopters to ONGC. She personally approved the funding of the contract from the UK aid programme". He reminded Wade-Gery that payment must be made by end of financial year and the Westlands AGM on 13 February, before saying, "When you see Narasimha Rao you might express surprise that the MEA seem to be unaware of Alexander's assurances to you and of the close contacts which have taken place about the Sikh problem [redactions]. The telegram then ends. It is copied once again to "F3, Box 500", i.e. the counter-subversion branch of MI5. Only the redacted content could be of relevance to MI5, and the redaction happens in the context of "close contacts" about Sikhs. This gives a strong signal that MI5 liaison with Indian intelligence was substantial by this stage, posing serious human rights questions."²³³

Take another example, this time more obvious. The British High Commissioner Sir Robert tells London that: "The Indians are still declining to talk to Westlands. There is not much time left if we want results before Westlands AGM on 13 February. ... I think I should now make a determined effort to see the Prime Minister

228 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp222-223 16 January 1985 BHC Delhi to FCO London: Indo-British relations

229 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p219. 17 January 1985. FCO London to Downing Street.

230 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p197. 1 February 1985. BHC Delhi to FCO London. Subject: Indo-British Relations and the Westlands contracts (Redactions)

231 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p190-193. 1 February 1985. FCO London to Downing Street: Subject: Indo-British Relations: Westlands Helicopters contract

232 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, P187. 6 February 1985. BHC Delhi to FCO London. Indo-British relations. Redactions. Copied to F3 at MI5.

233 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p185-186. 2 February 1985 from FCO London to BHC Delhi

himself ... If I do see the Prime Minister, I think I should cover the following points ... a) Mrs Thatcher's personal concern about the Sikh extremists [sic] in Britain and the danger which these pose for India (and Britain). Her determination to do all we can to help, and the importance she attaches to the current close cooperation [redactions].”²³⁴

This otherwise innocuous message was copied to F3 branch of MI5.

The closest to a smoking gun comes in the next telegram, when Geoffrey Howe replies to the diplomats in Delhi. He agreed they should seek a meeting with Rajiv Gandhi, but avoid mentioning the Westlands AGM as a specific reason for calling. “On linkage with Sikh extremists in the UK we should continue to give Rajiv the benefit of the doubt and not assume that he himself regards the issues as interdependent nor encourage him in such a direction.” Howe continues:

“You will need to make it clear that we do not necessarily accept the Indian thesis that Sikhs here are directing terrorism in India (a thesis for which the MEA have refused to provide evidence). You should say that the Prime Minister is personally concerned at the implications of Sikh extremist activities not only for India but also for community relations here. This would be a good opportunity to stress the close cooperation between the specialist British and Indian agencies. You should say in this connection that, while we are doing everything we can to keep the Indians informed at official level of all that we are doing about the Sikh threat, we are concerned that the message might not be getting through to Indian ministers.”²³⁵
[emphasis added]

'Specialist agencies' seems to be a fairly obvious euphemism for the intelligence services.

Wade-Gery, the British High Commissioner, met Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on 11 February 1985, where he established that the trade embargo was over. The mysterious UK-Indian collaboration was discussed as a priority.²³⁶ Then at a meeting between British diplomats and Indian's new foreign secretary Bhandari, the link between trade and controlling Sikhs was repeated: “GOI remain dissatisfied with our handling of the Sikh extremists [sic] in Britain but are calling off their policy of discriminatory sanctions against us. They no longer have any political 'reservations' about commercial contracts” Ultimately, Whitehall got the news it so desperately wanted: “Bhandari confirmed that the Westlands W.30 negotiations were covered by the green-light instructions.” Wade-Gery responded to the Indian minister, again emphasising the secret cooperation. “Our willingness to approach the matter in a cooperative and positive spirit was well illustrated by the excellent arrangements which had been made for close liaison [redactions]. Bhandari made clear that he was aware and appreciative of these arrangements.”²³⁷ Such liaison, censored though it is, was evidentially highly significant.

Cabinet was also told that diplomatic relations were improving and that the FCO had received, “renewed assurances that there was no embargo on visits to India by British Ministers or on commercial negotiations between the two countries.” However, Sikhs still posed a threat, since “resentment against the United Kingdom lingered on and that Indian feelings still ran high over the activities of Sikh extremists in the United Kingdom.”²³⁸

The link between trade deals and security co-operation is explicit: “Indian concerns about the activities of Sikh extremists [sic] in the UK, and what they see as HMG's lenience towards them, led to an Indian embargo on British ministerial visits and commercial negotiations. Mr Gandhi's Principal Secretary assured us in January that visits and negotiations could now go ahead. This was confirmed by Mr Gandhi on 8 February. But Indian doubts

234 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p183-185. 7 February 1985 from BHC Delhi to FCO London. Subject: Indo-British Relations and Westlands contract

235 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp180-182. 7 February 1985. Howe's reply to Wade-Gery

236 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, Pp173-174. 12 February 1985. Wade -Gery to FCO London. Subject: Call on Prime Minister Gandhi

237 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, Pp169- 171. 14 February 1985. BHC Delhi to FCO London

238 CAB 128/81/6, 14 February 1985. Another example is that Mr Jha, an Indian government adviser who had met Thatcher shortly before Bluestar was unleashed, called on the Prime Minister in March 1985 to complain that British laws were too “lenient” against Sikhs. The FCO warned Thatcher, in a redacted document, that Jha “made a special point about the activities of Sikh extremists in the UK, suggesting that our laws were too lenient.” Her objectives were to tell Mr Jha “that we are doing everything possible within our legal constraints to curb Sikh extremists [sic] in the UK”. The memo refers to some of these measures that the UK was taking: “Attorney-General studied [redactions] number of court cases against Sikh extremists [sic]: some of these recently refused entry to UK: important to maintain close liaison between our security authorities.” Whitehall was well aware that these measures took place under commercial pressure from the Indians: “Tactical arguments – Sikh Extremists [sic]: a) Welcome assurances that commercial negotiations can go ahead normally; know some in Indian bureaucracy advocate economic pressure on UK: must point out this only inhibits action by HMG: we cannot appear to be acting under duress.” (Source: PREM 19/1535, Visits to UK by L K Jha, member of the Brandt Commission and adviser to Indira Gandhi: meetings with Prime Minister July 1983 – March 1985. pp6-10. 20 March 1985.)

about our willingness to constrain Sikh extremists persist.”²³⁹ The next paragraph is censored in its entirety. The subsequent topic covers exclusion orders. “The Home Secretary has used his powers of exclusion against two prominent Sikh extremists [sic], Talwinder Singh Parmar and Jasbir Singh; a number of others have been refused entry to the UK. Several prosecutions for acts of violence have been brought against (low-level) members of Sikh extremist [sic] organisations.”²⁴⁰ The next half of the page is censored.

Downing Street learnt that Westlands' local agent was worried the French were about to win the contract.²⁴¹ This triggered a personal letter from Thatcher to Gandhi, stressing her support for the Westlands deal.²⁴² The picture remained mixed. When Treacher (of Westlands) met Bhatnagar a week later, he reminded him that technical problems were sorted last year, and enquired as to the real reason for delay “Bhatnagar admitted that the problems were political ... Treacher asked whether the political problem was Chauhan. After some reflection, Bhatnagar replied that he did not think so, 'because the British attitude has toughened recently'.” The next paragraph is censored, denying the public any insight into what a tougher British attitude towards its Sikh community involved.²⁴³ That same day, the Home Secretary sent a message to the Foreign Secretary, however it has been withheld from the archives.²⁴⁴ Cabinet meeting minutes from around this time show that ministers wanted to ban a Sikh pro-Khalistan rally in Hyde Park planned for April, even though the Metropolitan Police said “there was no reason to believe that the rally would attract violent opposition or otherwise give rise to significant public order difficulties.” Democratic rights in Britain were being sacrificed to safeguard trade with an autocratic Indian regime who would “not readily understand an apparent failure by the British Government to contain the activities of such extremists and deny them opportunities to draw public attention to their seditious purposes, and the risk of damage to Anglo-Indian relations was very considerable.” Thatcher summed up that, “It was the clear view of Cabinet that it was in the public interest that the rally should not take place.”²⁴⁵



Leon Brittan Home Secretary 1983-85

The connection between trade and citizenship applications is made explicit in a letter from Paul Channon, trade minister, to Geoffrey Howe, which refers to a letter that is missing:

“I have seen a copy of Leon Brittan's letter of 29 March to you about nationality applications by [redaction] Sikh extremists [sic], one of which cannot be refused. You will be conscious of the sensitivity of the Indian government towards our handling of such issues and the possibility that they could easily revert to a policy of sanctions against us, either at the political or commercial level, if they felt that our stance was not sufficiently firm. At the beginning of the year, sanctions were lifted before any real harm had been done but a prolonged period of discrimination against our exports could be damaging; there is quite a lot of trade at stake and a number of important major contracts.”²⁴⁶

Despite all the hysteria against Dr Chauhan, he was an innocent man. Based on his public statements and writings, the Metropolitan Police, Director of Public Prosecutions and the Attorney General all felt that there was insufficient grounds to prosecute him. The Home Office said:

“The view of the police and the Director of Public Prosecutions is that Dr Chauhan's remarks, even at their worst, do not amount to solicitation or persuasion to murder and that in any case it is most unlikely that it would ever be possible to prove (short of full admission) the necessary intent on the basis of the statements so far made by Dr Chauhan.”²⁴⁷

239 PREM 19/1535, Visits to UK by L K Jha, member of the Brandt Commission and adviser to Indira Gandhi: meetings with Prime Minister July 1983 – March 1985. Letter dated 20 March 1985, pp6-10 of pdf

240 PREM 19/1535, Visits to UK by L K Jha, member of the Brandt Commission and adviser to Indira Gandhi: meetings with Prime Minister July 1983 – March 1985. Letter dated 20 March 1985, pp6-10 of pdf

241 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p150. 21 March 1985. FCO London to Downing Street (redactions)

242 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp145-146. 22 March 1985.

243 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p137. 29 March 1985. BHC Delhi to FCO London

244 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p135. Dummy card Brittan to Howe dated 29 March 1985.

245 CAB 128/81/12, 28 March 1985

246 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p130. 16 April 1985. Letter from Paul Channon (trade minister) to Howe (FCO). Subject: Sikh extremists: damage to Indo-British relations

247 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp108-110 Home Office memo on prosecution of Dr Chauhan.

“So far Dr Chauhan has been careful to emphasise that he does not envisage or wish to see action taken in this country which would be in breach of British laws and the conclusion of the prosecuting authorities has been that there are no grounds for a prosecution of Dr Chauhan for these or any other offences. The police and ourselves remain on the look out for any further evidence which might provide a basis for prosecution of Dr Chauhan. The police, (though they do not make this public) have discussions with Dr Chauhan from time to time. They take the opportunity of such meetings to remind him of his responsibility to ensure that his activities remain within the law.”²⁴⁸

In spite of this fairly conclusive demonstration of Dr Chauhan's innocence, Thatcher was not satisfied. On receipt of a large selection of press cuttings on Dr Chauhan's statements Thatcher directed the bundle to the Attorney General.²⁴⁹ Further secret and censored discussions of citizenship laws took place.²⁵⁰ At the end of April 1985, the Chauhan case was discussed at the highest level, between the PM, the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, and it was “agreed that it would be desirable for the Law Officers to study the papers further.”²⁵¹ The letter was copied to Nigel Pantling in the Home Office, who was involved in earlier correspondence that has been censored. There are three letters from the last week of April 1985 which have been removed from the file.²⁵²

Amid the censored discussion about Chauhan, a stark warning came through from British diplomats in Delhi, following meetings between technicians from India and Westlands: “The indications appear to be that Gandhi has decided not to buy this helicopter and is seeking a reason for turning it down.”²⁵³ A week later, ministers were due to discuss Sikhs, however we are in the dark as to the full agenda. The file reads, “Subject – Meeting of Ministers: Sikhs: The purpose of this meeting is to discuss [redactions]. You may also want to mention Chauhan.”²⁵⁴

Thatcher was adamant that Chauhan should be prosecuted. The PM did “not see how Chauhan can evade the charge of inciting to violence simply by saying that he is not doing so, when the natural meaning of his words clearly indicates that he is. The Prime Minister is of the view that the Law Officers might with advantage study the papers [press cuttings] once more.”²⁵⁵ Other undemocratic measures were discussed. Nicholas Ridley from the department of transport proudly told Geoffrey Howe that “the Indians were impressed when I told them privately that we would have prevented the rally in Hyde Park which was due to take place on April 3rd.”²⁵⁶

After Rajiv Gandhi made a statement in India's parliament about the high cost of helicopters, Geoffrey Howe lamented that: “It seems unlikely that Gandhi will either want or be able to extricate himself from what can only be taken as a public commitment not to buy the W30. So we are probably being strung along. But if the Indians are leaving even a crack of door open, we should presumably wait and see what happens. There can presumably be no question of upping the aid offer. But you may like to find out if Westlands wish to rise to the hint about cost.”²⁵⁷

During 1985, Westlands was in dire financial difficulties. A Prime Minister's office file gives a clear impression that India's order of Westlands was viewed as crucial to company's survival. This was in a context where the company was regarded by the UK government as a “national defence interest”. In May 1985, trade minister Norman Tebbit told Thatcher that “The world helicopter market is currently very depressed and it may be another year or two before it picks up at all strongly. That is why we took such *exceptional measures* to try to secure the Indian order for the [Westlands] W30” (emphasis added).²⁵⁸ It is unclear what these 'exceptional measures' involved.

Cabinet minutes from June 1985 onwards show that Thatcher's hostile attitude toward the Sikh diaspora continued. On the anniversary of the *Sri Harmandir Sahib* massacre, the British government was firmly on the side of the perpetrators, with the victims framed as a threat: “The Indian Government could as necessary be told that everything possible was being done to prevent violence by the Sikh community in the United Kingdom on this

248 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp108-110 Home Office memo on prosecution of Dr Chauhan.

249 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp62-63. 19 April 1985.

250 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp56-57. Secret. Subject: Background note on the legal considerations arising from ***Redactions*** (Discussion of citizenship laws – not clear in relation to who.)

251 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p43. 29 April 1985. Downing Street to FCO. Subject: Chauhan.

252 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp54-55. Dummy card. Pantling to Powell dated 22 April 1985, and p48. Dummy card. Pantling to Powell dated 25 April 1985, with enclosure, and p41. Dummy card. Powell to Taylor dated 29 April 1985.

253 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp52-53. 23 April 1985. BHC Delhi to DTI. Meetings between technicians from India and Westlands.

254 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p40. 29 April 1985. Powell to Thatcher.

255 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, p39. 29 April 1985. Downing Street (Powell) to Home Office (Pantling) Subject – Sikh extremists [sic]: damage to Indo-British relations

256 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp33-34 – 30 April 1985.

257 PREM 19/1536 UK/Indian relations part 4 March 1984 – May 1985, pp28-29. 3 May 1985.

258 PREM 19/1415 AEROSPACE. Westlands Helicopters: part 1A. 30/04/1985 – 10/12/1985. Letter dated 16 May 1985, page 5 of pdf.

anniversary.”²⁵⁹ Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Britain later that year caused concern at Cabinet that Sikhs could scupper trade deals: “The Indian Government still harboured suspicions of the United Kingdom with regard to the activities of the Sikh community here. There were opportunities for major British contracts in India. It was highly desirable that the visit should be a success. Great care should be taken with the security aspects of the visit.”²⁶⁰

Extraordinarily a full Cabinet meeting on 25 July 1985 discussed a Sikh Sports Tournament due to take place later that month in West Bromwich. The Indian High Commission complained the event was a serious insult to India as the organisers had named the tournament in honour of Indira Gandhi's bodyguards who had killed her. Margaret Thatcher concluded she wanted urgent approaches to Sandwell District Council, the University of Aston that was hosting the hockey tournament and individuals who might have influence in the matter. She also asked for a high level approach to the BBC and other radio and television news organisations about the undesirability of major publicity.



Christopher Andrew MI5's official historian

MI5's official historian, Christopher Andrew, who was given unique and carefully controlled access to the Security Service's archive, has published more detail about MI5 surveillance of Sikhs than the FCO have released to the National Archives. Ahead of Rajiv Gandhi's state visit to Britain in October 1985, MI5 told the Home Office that “The level of support for the [Sikh] extremists has diminished considerably but this is making the hard core increasingly frustrated and could lead to further violence.” Andrew's claims that “good intelligence”, combined with arrests of Sikh activists, frustrated plots to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi.²⁶¹

Among those arrested were four Sikhs in Leicester, who had been in contact with men who claimed to be IRA members. In fact, they were undercover law enforcement officers. Two of the men, Jarnail Singh Ranuana and Sukhvinder Singh Gill, were convicted and served sentences totalling 30 years. However, the undercover officers had refused to give evidence at the initial trial, to protect their identities. The defence argued that they had acted as agent provocateurs.²⁶²

Further efforts were made to infiltrate Sikh groups. According to MI5's historian, the service's director-general told the Home Office in April 1986 that a minority of violent members within the ISYF “form a small intensely security-conscious group who, because of the nature of the Sikh community, are a difficult target”. Their conversations were bugged, but MI5's efforts were hampered by a lack of transcribers who spoke Punjabi. The director-general added that “I would also like to see our agent running effort improved but again it takes time to find the right staff for the difficult task of recruiting and running this kind of agent.” This indicated that MI5 was already running agents within Sikh groups, raising concerns about whether they shared any of the intelligence from these sources with their Indian counter-parts, and whether the agents incited Sikhs to carry out attacks. Britain's use of agents within Loyalist paramilitary groups in the 1980s has been strongly criticised in the De Silva Review, and the activities of Special Branch officers within left-wing groups in England and Wales are now the subject of the Pitchford Inquiry. The infiltration of a minority community by MI5 during that same period should also warrant greater scrutiny.

Throughout 1985, Britain's foreign secretary was in contact with the home secretary about “the question of deportation of Sikh extremists”, even though Sikh prisoners in India were being routinely tortured at this stage. Whitehall's priority was clear, “It would be important to convince India that the Government was doing everything possible about Sikh extremist activity in this country.” The appointment of a 'special representative' to deal with the issue was considered.

The British government is yet to declassify much of its records on India from after 1985. Cabinet minutes show that foreign policy priorities remained the same in 1986, even as the Indian army's brutal counter-insurgency

259 CAB 128/81/19, 6 June 1985

260 CAB 128/81/27, 12 September 1985

261 Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm – The Authorized History of MI5*, Penguin 2010, page 737

262 <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/leicester-sikhs-allegedly-attempted-to-hire-ira-to-assassinate-rajiv-gandhi-held/1/348516.html>

policies in the Punjab gathered pace. This demonstrates the need for an independent investigation to consider the entire emergency period, and not solely a single event in June 1984.

The foreign secretary visited India in 1986 “to promote trade opportunities for Britain”, however, “His discussion in India had been dominated by the Sikh question. There was great concern about the situation in the Punjab.”²⁶³ This trip took place weeks before Indian forces once again raided the *Sri Harmandir Sahib*, as part of Operation Black Thunder I. Cabinet minutes from after the raid noted approvingly that: “The operation appeared to have been reasonably successful but it was not yet clear whether the extremist leaders had been arrested or were merely in hiding, or whether there had been casualties. The authorities in this country had been alerted to the possibility of demonstrations or violence by Sikh residents here.”²⁶⁴ A Sikh protest against Rajiv Gandhi's visit to London in August 1986 was discouraged by ministers.²⁶⁵

As late as November 1986, two years after Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Cabinet forbade political contact with Sikh nationalists. The foreign secretary said that, “the Indian Government were understandably and highly sensitive to any question involving Sikh nationalism.” An extradition treaty was said to have satisfied some Indian concerns, however, “It was important that members of the Government should do all they reasonably could do to avoid contacts with Sikh nationalists which might be misrepresented by the latter as expressions of Government support for the cause of an independent Khalistan.”²⁶⁶

As late as November 1987, Cabinet ministers were warned about trips by Sikh human rights activists to Parliament, with the foreign secretary telling his ministerial colleagues that: “the Sikh Human Rights Group were expected to mount a lobby of Parliament that day. This Group, which was a front organisation for the International Sikh Youth Federation, was seeking to enlist the support of international human rights groups for the creation of an independent state of Khalistan. Government supporters should have nothing to do with the group.”²⁶⁷

The fate of the protracted Westlands helicopter deal shows that this morally bankrupt policy came to nothing in the end, other than aiding India's repression of Sikhs. The company's financial problems continued and a proposed merger to rescue the company led to a very public split in the cabinet, after which Heseltine and Brittan both resigned. The Westlands deal with India was eventually signed in 1987. However, there were technical problems with helicopters, and they never worked properly. They are a poignant symbol of a broken British foreign policy, which mercilessly pushed trade at the expense of civil rights.



Sikhs mark the anniversary of June 1984 (operation bluestar) with an annual Remembrance March & Freedom Rally at London's iconic Trafalgar Square, attended by tens of thousands from across the UK in the pursuit of Truth, Justice & Freedom.

263 CAB 128/83/14, 10 April 1986

264 CAB 128/83/18, 1 May 1986

265 CAB 128/83/29, 24 July 1986

266 CAB 128/83/37, 13 November 1986

267 CAB 128/87/8, 12 November 1987



SIKH FEDERATION (UK)

The Sikh Federation (UK) is a non-governmental organisation, that is a pressure group and often referred to as the first ever Sikh political party in the United Kingdom. The Sikh Federation (UK) is based on the 'miri-piri' principle, the Sikh principle that temporal and spiritual goals are indivisible.

The organisation was established in September 2003 with the aim of giving Sikhs a stronger political voice by taking an increasing interest in mainstream politics in the UK. Around 200 Gurdwaras and Sikh organisations are either affiliated or support the work of the Federation, as well as a number of international organisations and wider Sikh community who look to the Sikh Federation (UK) for leadership and direction on key issues.

The Sikh Federation (UK) has spearheaded the campaign to uncover the truth and extent of the UK government involvement in the 1984 Amritsar massacre, since 2014 through its pursuit of an independent public inquiry into the government's role in 1984 and beyond and its support for the Indian authorities and own anti-sikh measures in the UK.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To work closely with each of the main political parties in the UK to promote relevant issues set out in the Sikh Agenda for the UK Government.

The main areas of work for the Sikh Federation (UK) are;

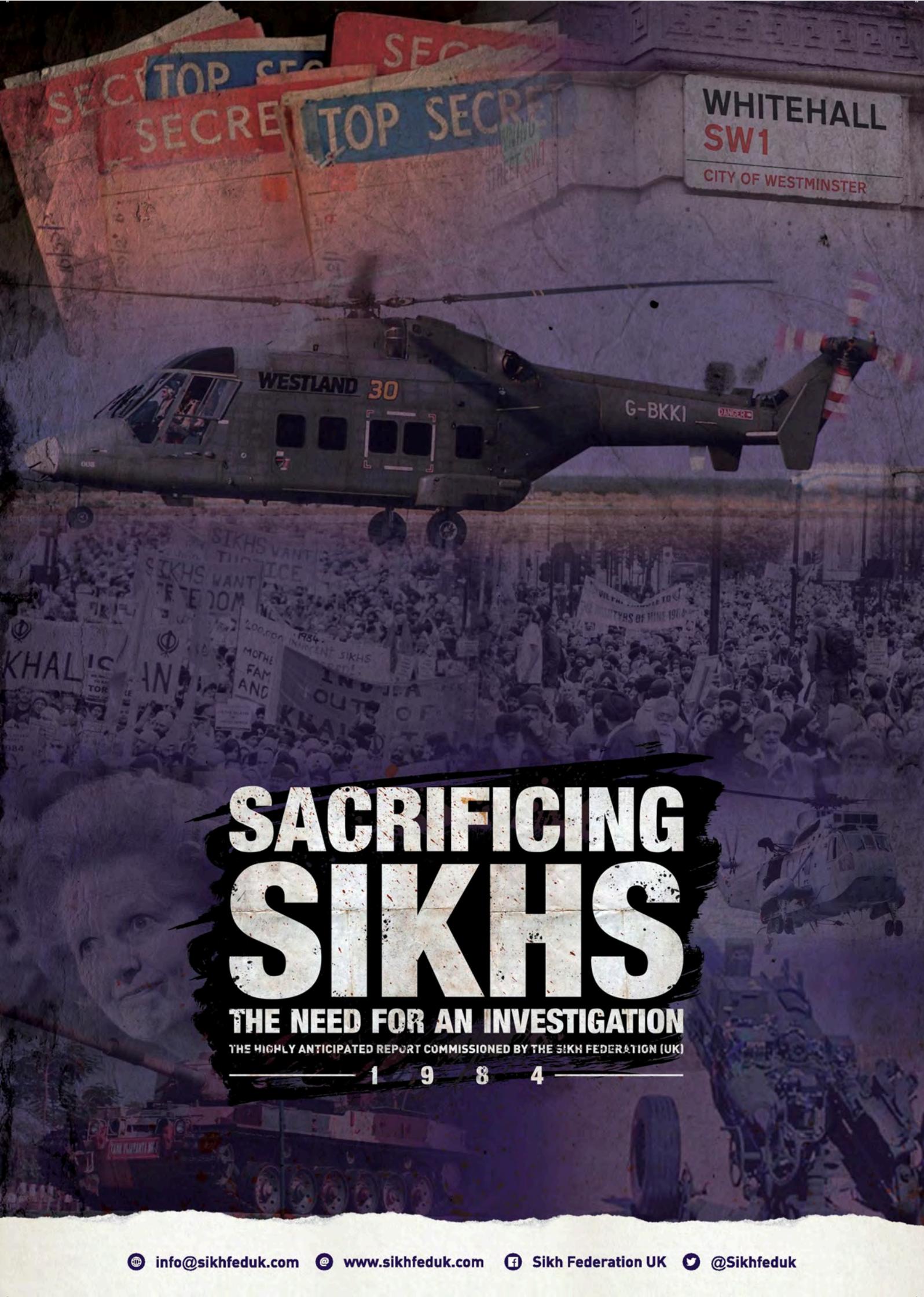
- ⦿ Defending and promoting the Sikh religion, identity, philosophy and way of life - working within the Sikh community and with local and national government;
- ⦿ Building a stronger political voice in the UK and abroad;
- ⦿ Campaign for human rights issues impacting on Sikhs in the UK and abroad - working with human rights groups, non-governmental organisations and politicians; and
- ⦿ Argue the case for the right to self-determination for the Sikhs and lobbying politicians, the UK Government, official representatives of foreign governments in the UK, the European Parliament and at the United Nations for the establishment of an independent sovereign Sikh homeland Khalistan.

PHIL MILLER

Phil Miller is a freelance investigative journalist and researcher. He has written articles for VICE, Private Eye, Times, Irish Times, Mail on Sunday, Guardian, Daily Mirror, Irish News, New Humanist and openDemocracy. His investigations into UK immigration detention centres have featured on Channel 4 News. Phil has carried out extensive research at the UK National Archives into British involvement in a range of conflicts.

Phil originally uncovered the January 2014 revelations of the UK governments role and use of the SAS in supporting the 1984 Golden Temple raid in Amritsar (Operation Bluestar).

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SACRIFICING SIKHS

THE NEED FOR AN INVESTIGATION

THE HIGHLY ANTICIPATED REPORT COMMISSIONED BY THE SIKH FEDERATION (UK)

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