

Dhaliwal lobbies to save jailed terrorist from hanging

Reporter Kim Bolan recently travelled to India to investigate the roots of the movement alleged to have led to Canada's worst act of terrorism, the 1985 Air India bombing which claimed the lives of 329 people.

Kim Bolan

Vancouver Sun

NEW DELHI -- A powerful Canadian lobby supported by prominent Liberals, including federal cabinet minister Herb Dhaliwal, is campaigning to save the life of a convicted Sikh terrorist under sentence of death in India.

The lobby on behalf of Davinder Pal Singh Bhullar, who is married to a Surrey woman, is also backed by federal Secretary of State David Kilgour and Liberal organizer Jay Minhas.

It has included letter writing, meetings with high-level Canadian and Indian officials, including Prime Minister Jean Chretien, and -- in the case of Kilgour -- sending an assistant to India at government expense to aid Bhullar's wife in her campaign to save her husband's life and get him freed.

Bhullar, a convicted leader of the Khalistan Commando Force, has been sentenced to hang for conspiring in a 1993 terrorist bombing that killed nine people in the Indian capital. He is also a suspect in two other deadly attacks linked by Indian police to the Sikh separatist movement.

But his links to terrorism, upheld in a recent high court ruling, have not stopped the outpouring of international support, especially from Canada.

Dhaliwal, the federal natural resources minister, wrote to the Indian president two months ago condemning the death penalty "as a tool of punishment," but also saying "many people are alleging that his confession was obtained under torture" and questioning "the credibility of the police."

His aide, Amarjeet Singh Rattan, said Friday that Dhaliwal is not saying Bhullar is innocent, but is simply raising the concerns of Bhullar supporters in Canada, as well as those of the dissenting judge on the panel that voted 2-1 to convict Bhullar and sentenced him to die.

Kilgour wrote a letter expressing "the wishes of thousands of Canadians that Professor Bhullar be granted clemency." He also raised the Bhullar case in the House of Commons in January and sent Edmonton constituency assistant Sukhbir Singh Lalli to India, at government expense, to help Navneet Kaur Sandhu, Bhullar's Canadian wife.

"She was pleading for her husband," Kilgour's spokesman, Jesse Cringan, confirmed this week.

He said Lalli went on the public's tab because Sandhu is a Canadian citizen, even though she lives in Surrey and not in Kilgour's Edmonton constituency.

Dhaliwal's involvement came after he was visited by several people from the pro-Bhullar campaign who travelled to Ottawa in January to plead his case. On that trip, the pro-Bhullar delegates, including two former members of the terrorist-linked International Sikh Youth Federation, also



(Davinder Pal Singh) Bhullar



Former Congress Party Youth leader Maninderjit Singh Bitta (in turban), survived a bomb blast set off by Davinder Pal Singh Bhullar in September 1993 that killed nine other people. The armed men in uniform surrounding Bitta are his bodyguards. Bitta claims the Canadian lobby movement to free Bhullar is run by Sikh separatists who have fled to Canada.



members of the terrorist-linked International Sikh Youth Federation, also met Chretien, Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham, Industry Minister Alan Rock and Heritage Minister Sheila Copps.



A body lies in the street in front of wreckage of the Sept. 11, 1993, car bombing in New Delhi.

They met former finance minister and Liberal leadership candidate Paul Martin on another trip to Calgary. Both NDP MP Svend Robinson and Surrey Alliance MP Gurmant Grewal also raised the Bhullar case during question period.

But Dhaliwal was the only federal cabinet minister to send off a letter to India. His letter has been widely quoted in the Indian media, including a pro-separatist magazine in Punjab.

The Canadian efforts, especially those by high-level politicians, enrage Maninder Singh Bitta, a former Congress Youth leader who was the target of the 1993 bombing after he widely condemned Sikh separatist violence.



K.P.S. Gill, (left) former head of Punjab police.

Sitting in his elegant office here, he pulls out dozens of newspaper reports of the attack with graphic photos of the victims. One particularly gruesome image shows an ambulance worker carrying the severed head of a man.

Anyone who supports Bhullar, he said, should talk to the relatives of the victims. He still has pain from the injuries he suffered.

"Why are the Canadian politicians so interested in Bhullar when it has nothing to do with them?" Bitta asked in a recent interview. "Bhullar's wife is crying, 'Don't give him the death penalty.' But what about the families of these people killed by Bhullar. They are also human beings."



Jay Minhas (right) went to Chandigarh to lobby for Davinder Pal Singh Bhullar.

Bitta said Indian agents told him shortly after the bombing that the attack was plotted in Canada. He said he has since obtained other information suggesting a link between Sikh separatists in Canada and the blast.

Bitta wrote to the head of Indian intelligence a year ago with information about the Canadian connection. He showed a Sun reporter his letter, which contains the names of two British Columbians, but refused to provide a copy.

Bitta said the Canadian lobby is being pushed by committed remnants of the Sikh separatist movement -- living in Canada.

He also finds it odd that there is such a strong Canadian campaign so soon before the trial is set to begin in Vancouver for two Sikh separatists alleged to have blown up an Air India flight in 1985, killing all 329 aboard.

Mainstream Canadian politicians are endorsing the Bhullar campaign to get votes, Bitta charged.

The free-Bhullar campaign did not stop after the Ottawa trip in January.

A B.C. delegation, headed by Minhas, vice-chairman of the South Asian Human Rights Committee of Canada, travelled to India last month to lobby Indian politicians and journalists on behalf of Bhullar.



Jasbir Singh Rode, nephew of slain militant Jarnail Bhindranwale, has enlisted support for Bhullar.

They also met with Bhullar's wife.

The Vancouver Sun interviewed Minhas in Chandigarh, the Punjabi capital, where he bought a group of prominent local journalists dinner and drinks as he pleaded for their help on the Bhullar case.

"I have been living in Canada the last 10 years and this is the only case where someone is

"I have been living in Canada the last 19 years and this is the only case where everyone is together. Justice has to be served for Mr. Bhullar. It is our appeal from the bottom of our hearts," said Minhas as the reporters dined at an expensive Chinese restaurant.

Minhas provided them with a letter to Indian MPs, signed by his committee's chairman, Harpal Singh Nagra.

The letter falsely claims that "all five political parties of the Canadian government have given unanimous support to Mrs. Bhullar and promised to appeal to the Indian government on her behalf."

Nagra, a Lower Mainland resident, could not make the trip himself. He claimed refugee status in Canada on the basis that India would persecute him if he returned here. The basis for his claim was that he was a founder of the International Sikh Youth Federation, which has now been designated a terrorist group in several countries including the United States and the United Kingdom. He told a refugee board he left the ISYF when he saw how violent it had become.

The Canadian immigration department fought to keep Nagra out of Canada, citing links to terrorism, but he won his claim in late 1998 and is now a successful B.C. businessman.

In fact, the address on the letterhead of the human rights committee is Nagra's Vancouver business address. Another letter supporting Bhullar, from the Canadian Sikh Human Rights Group, lists the same address and is signed by Amrit Singh Rai, the former ISYF spokesman.

Minhas admitted the only case his human rights committee has taken up is that of Bhullar. The committee is not registered as a charity or non-profit group.

But it has support from all sectors of society, including Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs, he said.

"This issue is very hot," Minhas said. "It is not a Sikh issue. It is a human rights issue."

Some Indian politicians, including most of those from Punjab, support the commutation of Bhullar's death sentence to life in prison. But they are not going as far as the Canadian lobbyists, who say without a doubt that Bhullar should be freed.

"I think he is innocent. We are looking for an acquittal. There were 133 witnesses and none of them could recognize Mr. Bhullar," Minhas said.

He also said a confession signed by Bhullar was obtained through torture.

Minhas took out an ad in the Indian Express newspaper last month on behalf of the Canadian committee to protest Bhullar's imprisonment.

He said he is hoping for a positive result now that a prominent and controversial lawyer named Ram Jethmalani has agreed to take the case. Jethmalani represented one of the assassins of Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi.

He was also honoured at a 1999 fund-raising dinner in the Lower Mainland hosted by Indo-Canadian businessmen including Air India bombing suspect Ripudaman Singh Malik.

Another Malik family friend is active in the Bhullar campaign. Simranjit Singh Mann, a separatist MP who heads the Akali Dal (Amritsar) party told The Sun he has been campaigning tirelessly to save Bhullar.

Mann twice visited Malik's Khalsa School in Surrey. He was also close to Malik's father, Ranjit Singh, when Mann was police chief of their city, Ferozpur, in the late 1970s.

"I believe that he should have a new trial," Mann said of Bhullar. "It is immoral to hang him."

Mann also said he has travelled to Germany to meet with the foreign office there and get its support on Bhullar's behalf.

"They are now calling for a commuting of the death sentence," said Mann, who also met with Minhas.

Another Khalistani leader is also taking credit for getting the international Bhullar lobby going, particularly in Canada.

Jasbir Singh Rode is the nephew of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale -- the separatist leader who holed up in the Golden Temple in 1984 with a large cache of weapons and supporters. Bhindranwale's tactics so alarmed the Indian government that it sent in the army on June 4, 1984, killing him and hundreds of others.

It was that act that allegedly led to the bombing of Air India Flight 182 by a group of Canadian Sikh separatists retaliating for the attack.

Rode had already left for England when the army raided the temple, Sikhism's holiest shrine. His brother, Lakhbir Singh Brar, another separatist leader, fled to Canada and filed a refugee claim in Vancouver but was eventually deported.

In England, Rode formed the ISYF, along with Nagra, the man now heading the human rights committee fighting for Bhullar's life. Back then, Nagra was known as Harjinderpal or Harpal Singh Ghuman.

Rode, who now edits a family-owned newspaper in the Punjabi city of Jalandhar, said he has arranged most of the international support for Bhullar, including the Canadian contingent.

He said he has called many contacts in Vancouver about the cause, including those connected to the ISYF. But he also said he has not been in direct contact with Nagra, though he was aware his Sikh federation co-founder was heading the Canadian committee.

In March, Rode met with one of the committee's delegates who travelled to India with Minhas -- a man named Gurdev Singh Johal.

Rode said so many people are willing to take up the Bhullar case because they are upset that no one has been convicted of killing thousands of Sikhs in the riots that followed Gandhi's assassination on Oct. 31, 1984.

"On the other hand, on flimsy evidence, people like Bhullar, they are being prosecuted and punished," Rode said. "It was mainly our initiative that we launched a campaign for Bhullar's freedom and wrongful punishment."

Bitta says any Canadians fighting to free Bhullar should talk to those who lost relatives in the bombing.

An animated man with a moustache that curls up on either side, Bitta has turned a total of 14 terrorist attacks against him into a personal crusade and a paying job.

He founded and heads a group called the All-India Anti-Terrorism Front.

He boasts that he rates the highest security level in India -- "Z-plus" -- and is always accompanied by five armed police officers.

Some critics think Bitta has profited from his misfortune, oversimplifying complex issues with punchy media quotes and sound bites.

But the former head of the Punjab Police, K.P.S. Gill, thinks Bitta is on the mark.

Gill, who is credited with crushing the separatist campaign in Punjab between 1988 and 1992, has absolutely no doubt that Bhullar is guilty and should pay for his crimes.

"He is not innocent," he said in a recent interview in Jalandhar. "He is a suspect in two other cases."

Gill said he is "totally frustrated" by the Canadian lobby, which he believes is being backed by Pakistani agents hostile to India. Some of the Canadians even asked to meet with him last month, but he refused. He is now speaking out against the international lobbyists in interviews across India.

"I look upon it with a great deal of cynicism. It has a lot to do with voting blocs," Gill said.

The fate of Bhullar remains with India's president, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who can grant clemency or uphold the court's verdict. A decision is expected within two months.

Whatever happens, it is likely to be controversial in a country where terrorist attacks have become almost routine and often play behind the cricket results on the evening news.

But for Bitta, the memories of the 1993 attack -- which ironically occurred on Sept. 11 -- are all too fresh.

He was sitting in his car outside the Congress Party Youth office on Raisina Road, near the Indian parliament.

"I had just left the office. It was between 11 a.m. and noon. There were two cars -- a pilot car with a security person and another car with a security person. And then the bomb went off. It was a car bomb. It was 40 kilograms of RDX explosive, which is one of the most dangerous," he recalled.

Bhullar, an admitted activist in the movement to create a Sikh state called Khalistan in Punjab, was a suspect almost immediately. He sneaked out of the country several months later with the help of some friends.

He arrived in Germany in December, 1994 and made a refugee claim, saying he had joined the All India Sikh Student Federation -- then banned as a terrorist group -- adopted a pseudonym and operated underground to avoid Indian authorities.

He also said several of his relatives and friends had been killed by Punjab police. Bhullar told German officials that prior to his arrival in that country, he received help from Simranjit Mann, the Khalistani MP who is also close to Malik's family.

"I was advised by someone on the plane not to reveal my real identity as the Indian government would be after me. When police brought me here, I was unprepared. I called a member of AISSF (in Germany) who said I could reveal my true identity," Bhullar said in his statement to German authorities.

But Germany deported Bhullar in January, 1995. He was arrested upon his return to India. His appeals have all been exhausted, leading to the international campaign that has picked up momentum in recent months.

Several other B.C. politicians have written letters of support, including provincial Liberals Patty Sihota and Dr. Gulzar Singh Cheema.

German and British politicians have also written to the Indian government, mainly to protest Bhullar's pending execution. Former chief minister Parkash Singh Badal, who heads the main faction of the Akali Dal, also told The Sun he favours commuting the sentence to life in prison, but is not taking a position on whether Bhullar is innocent.

But Bitta has no sympathy at all. Not even for the idea of commuting the death sentence. He points out that a life sentence in prison in India is 14 years, with most people getting out in less than seven.

Bitta said the terrorists have ruined the image of Sikhism and he is a proud Sikh.

He has decided that his mission is to fight against terrorism, even if it means more threats and more attacks.

"Nothing can stop me from continuing this movement," he said. "They have started an international movement for Bhullar. Well, I am starting an international movement too and I will visit those countries and I will get [alleged terrorists who have fled India] extradited and they can come to India to face justice."

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Monday: Kim Bolan visits the native towns of those linked to the bombing.

Tuesday: In India, relatives of victims of the bombing are closely watching the case in Canada.

Wednesday: The rise and fall of the Sikh separatist movement for Khalistan.

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