

Sikh student sues U.S. Army, says ROTC enlistment blocked because of his faith

By David Shortell , CNN

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Iknor Singh requested a religious exemption from the military's grooming policies to enlist as an ROTC cadet.

(CNN) -- A Sikh student at Hofstra University filed a lawsuit Wednesday against the United States Army, claiming the service refused to grant him a religious accommodation that would allow him to enlist in his school's ROTC program without shaving his beard, cutting his hair and removing his turban, according to court documents.

When Iknor Singh requested a religious exemption from the military's grooming policies to enlist as an ROTC cadet in

April 2013, his request was first denied on the grounds that his noncompliance would have "an adverse impact on the Army's readiness, unit cohesion, standards, health, safety, or discipline," court documents said.

The Army subsequently adjusted its decision, saying Singh could only seek an exemption after he was enlisted as a cadet -- creating a catch-22 in which Singh would have to violate his faith to be able to apply for a religious accommodation, the documents said.

"I couldn't believe the military was asking me to make the impossible decision of choosing between the country I love and my faith," Singh said in a blog post on the ACLU's website.

The lawsuit, filed jointly by the ACLU and United Sikhs, which describes itself as a U.N.-affiliated nonprofit organization, claims that the Army's denial of religious exemption violated the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The case was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

As a practicing Sikh, Singh maintains certain articles of faith, including 'kesh,' which the court documents describe as "rooted in the belief that allowing hair to grow naturally is a sign of respect toward the perfection of God's creation."

The court documents continue: "Like most Sikhs, Mr. Singh believes that the turban is an inseparable part of his Sikh religious identity and that exposing his "naked" head in public, as Defendants would require upon his enlistment, would be sacrilegious and shameful."

Singh was born and raised in Queens, New York, and has dreams of serving as a military intelligence officer, according to court documents.

A sophomore at the Hempstead, New York, university, Singh is a finance major and audits the ROTC military-science coursework as an unenlisted member of the program, according to court documents.

In a statement, Hofstra University said it "entirely supports Mr. Singh's ambitions to serve his country. He is currently enrolled in the ROTC class and we are providing him leadership training to the extent that the U.S. Army has allowed. We very much hope that the Army will permit us to enroll Mr. Singh in the program

as a full Cadet."

The Army has allowed religious exemptions to its grooming and dress regulations for Sikhs in the past. A 2010 news article published on the Army's website described the accommodation that was allowed to Capt. Tejdeep Singh Rattan and Capt. Kamaljeet Singh Kalsi, both Sikhs.

"The Army does allow personnel to request waivers for practices that may conflict with current Army regulations and policies and are considered on a case-by-case basis," the article said.

A spokeswoman for the Army did not have a comment available on exemptions to its grooming policy available at the time of the publication of this article.

In September, the Army adjusted its grooming policies to allow female soldiers to wear braids, cornrows and twists in their hair -- a policy shift that resulted from a public petition that called the ban "racially biased."

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