

Justice department backs Sikh inmate

by [Richard Yeakley](#)

March 16, 2011

(RNS) The Justice Department has filed suit against California prison officials on behalf of a Sikh inmate who says his religious freedom was violated when officials punished him for not cutting his beard.

Sukhjinder Basra, incarcerated at the California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo on a drug offense, was punished for refusing to shave his beard in accordance with prison grooming policy.

The suit states that by requiring Basra to shave, the prison compelled him to rebel against his religious beliefs, a violation of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act.

"The freedom to practice one's faith in peace is among our most cherished rights," said Thomas Perez, assistant attorney general for the Civil Rights Division. "RLUIPA has proven to be a powerful tool in combating religious discrimination and ensuring religious freedom."

RLUIPA became law in 2000 and defends the religious freedom of those in prisons, mental health facilities and state-run nursing homes.

Practitioners of Sikhism hold that cutting one's hair violates God's design.