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D.A. BROWN: QUEENS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT CHARGED WITH HATE CRIME
Allegedly Violated Religious Beliefs of Sikh Student by Cutting Off Hair

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown today announced that a 17-year-old Pakistani student at Newtown High School in Elmhurst, Queens, is being held on felony hate charges stemming from an incident at the school yesterday in which a 15-year-old Sikh student was made to remove his dastar (turban) and his hair was cut. The dastar is a traditional Sikh headdress and an article of faith for Sikhs, and, for religious reasons, the hair is never cut.

District Attorney Brown said, “The defendant is not accused of some schoolhouse prank but an attack on the fundamental beliefs of his victim’s religion and his freedom to worship freely. His alleged actions have no place in a civilized society – especially in Queens County, the most culturally diverse county in the nation. Crimes of hate can never be tolerated here.”

The District Attorney identified the defendant as Umair Ahmed, 17, of 42-49 77th Street. The defendant, who is being held pending arraignment later today in Queens Criminal Court, is charged with second-degree unlawful imprisonment as a hate crime, second-degree menacing as a hate crime, second-degree aggravated harassment, second-degree harassment and fourth-degree criminal possession of a weapon. If convicted, the defendant faces up to seven years in prison.

District Attorney Brown said that, according to the charges, just after 12:00 noon on May 24, 2007, the defendant, armed with a pair of scissors, approached 15-year-old Vacher Harpal in the hallway of Newtown High School, located at 48-01 90th Street, and stated, “I have to cut your hair.” When Harpal asked, “For what, it is against my religion,” the defendant allegedly displayed a ring with Arabic inscriptions and stated, “This ring is Allah. If you don’t let me cut your hair, I will punch you with this ring.” It is alleged that Harpal initially refused to go into the bathroom with the defendant because he feared that the defendant would hurt him with the scissors.

Once inside the bathroom, it is alleged that Harpal removed his dastar while crying and begging the defendant not to cut his hair, which had never been cut and fell past his waist. The defendant is then alleged to have used the scissors to cut Harpal’s hair to the neckline and thrown the hair into the toilet and onto the floor.

The defendant was arrested by police officers assigned to the NYPD’s School Safety Division and the case was turned over to the NYPD’s Hate Crimes Task Force for investigation.

Assistant District Attorney Michael E. Brovner, of the District Attorney’s Gang Violence and Hate Crimes Bureau, is prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys Mariela Palomino Herring, Bureau Chief, and Michelle E. Goldstein, Deputy Bureau Chief, and the overall supervision of Senior Executive Assistant District Attorney for Trials James C. Quinn and Deputy Executive Assistant District Attorneys for Trials John H. Larsen and Robert J. Masters.

It should be noted that a criminal complaint is merely an accusation and that the defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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Note to Editors: Press release e-version posted at www.queensda.org.