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Canada

Turban makes religion an issue — challengers

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When Sikh RCMP officers are allowed to wear turbans with their uniforms, it makes their religion a public issue, says a lawyer for a group challenging Mounties' right to wear the headgear.

"There are limits to the government's obligation, and indeed its right, to accommodate religious symbolism," Mark Edwards told a packed Federal Court chamber Tuesday.

A group of former Mounties from southern Alberta is arguing the force's decision several years ago to allow British Columbia officer Baltej Dhillon to wear a turban violates the state's obligation to treat all citizens equally.

The case has implications for native officers who wear braids as well as for other minorities working in uniform for the RCMP.

Allowing the uniform to be altered to reflect religious or ethnic background destroys the public perception that the RCMP is impartial and non-sectarian, say the former Mounties. The federal attorney general and solicitor general are named in the suit along with RCMP commanders.

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association, World Sikh Organization and Canadian Human Rights Commission will also have their say as intervenors on the other side of the case. If the suit is successful it will be a damaging blow to Dhillon, who works in Quesnel, B.C., Sikh leaders say.

"This situation is very dear to all the Sikhs, not only in Canada but

throughout the world, because the turban is mandatory," said Ram Raghbir Singh Chahal of the World Sikh Organization.

Organization lawyer Drew Schroeder says it's "wrong-headed" to suggest the need for separation of church and state in this context.

"We're not talking about the Middle Ages and the Roman Catholic church controlling the population," he said outside court. "We're living in a modern, multifaceted, multicultural democracy."

But a spokesman for the plaintiffs says the action is not aimed specifically against Canada's 230,000 Sikhs. There is dissension around the world based on religious differences — including between Sikhs and Hindus — and Canadians shouldn't be faced with such issues when dealing with a police officer, said Bernie Pelot, a retired staff-sergeant.

"If a Canadian Hindu is driving down the highway in Canada and has to deal with a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, then that Canadian Hindu should not have to face what you might call a traditional enemy," said Pelot.

The court heard Tuesday from Kay Mansbridge, a former Mountie's wife who helped organize a 210,000-name petition against the uniform change, and Howard Davis, one RCMP veteran who launched the suit.

Both said they did not object to changes to the uniform to accommodate women and would have no problem being approached by any woman or ethnic minority officer as long as they were in uniform.