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Retired RCMP resurrect turban issue

They want headgear banned

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Three retired Southern Alberta Mounties are going to court next month to challenge a four-year-old decision allowing Sikh RCMP officers to wear turbans.

The Lethbridge RCMP Veterans' Court Challenge Committee will argue the practice is unconstitutional because it fosters an unhealthy mix of church and state.

They say allowing Sikh officers to wear their religious headgear diminishes the "integrity of the law" and the "ability of the RCMP and its members to perform their duties impartially."

Kenneth Riley, one of the officers behind the push, said his group filed the challenge with the Federal Court of Canada three years ago.

Since then, the committee has raised about \$100,000 to help fund the fight. A national petition collected more than 200,000 signatures from people who support the challenge.

Alberta civil liberty and religious groups have jumped on the opposite side with the government and the RCMP, to fight what they fear would be a damaging decision should the challenge win.

Edmonton human rights lawyer Shirish Chotalia plans to attend the eight-day hearing to lend another voice to the opposing arguments.

Chotalia was recently granted permission to file a written dissenting argument on behalf of two religious groups and the Alberta Civil Liberties Association.

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ans. It has very bad implications for all who require any accommodation for religious beliefs," Chotalia said.

Riley said his group is not out to hurt anyone and is not anti-religious or anti-Sikh.

"It doesn't matter what a person's color is or what is his race."

But police officers should represent the state, not an identifiable group, he said.

Riley feels strongly enough about the issue to pursue the court challenge even though he realizes it will stir up more controversy.

"I know it would be easier to say, 'to heck with it.' I'm an old man. But I fought for this country for many years. I'm not stopping now."

The chairman of the Inter Faith Coalition of Edmonton says the issue is not about Sikhs and turbans.

"We're talking about basic religious rights and freedoms," Parm Basahti said.

Jagjit Sidhu, an Edmonton Sikh, believes the issue is so important he's been attending meetings to support the Inter Faith Coalition's stance.

"I wear a turban and I find most people are very gentle and are not racists. But, still I hear sometimes that some minority groups have not been treated with respect."

The court challenge will begin Jan. 25, in the Calgary Federal Court of Canada.