U. S. Department of Justice

Civil Rights Division

Office of the Assistant Attorney General *Washington, D.C. 20035*

August 20, 2004

As a new school year begins, I write to raise with you an issue that the Civil Rights Division has taken steps to address. Specifically, we have seen several ugly and hateful incidents of violence and discrimination directed against Muslim, Arab, Sikh, and South-Asian students, motivated by religious or national origin intolerance.

Last year, for example, in Louisiana a high school world history teacher allegedly stripped a Muslim student's head scarf, or *hijab*, off her head, reportedly remarking: "I didn't know you had hair under there....I hope God punishes you. No, I'm sorry. I hope Allah punishes you." In California, a high school teacher allegedly grabbed a Sikh student's beard, pulled it, and accused him of being a member of the Taliban. And, in Oklahoma, the local public school district twice suspended a sixth-grade Muslim girl for wearing a *hijab*. Teachers there apparently expressed concern that the *hijab* would somehow "frighten" other children.

Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush visited the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., to underscore a simple yet fundamental point: "America counts millions of Muslims amongst our citizens, and Muslims make an incredibly valuable contribution to our country. Muslims are doctors, lawyers, law professors, members of the military, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, moms and dads. And they need to be treated with respect. In our anger and emotion, our fellow Americans must treat each other with respect."

No less is true for members of the Arab, South Asian, and Sikh-American communities. Again, in the President's words: "Those who feel like they can intimidate our fellow citizens to take out their anger don't represent the best of America, they represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of that kind of behavior."

Since September 11, 2001, the Civil Rights Division has investigated nearly 600 incidents of violence directed against Arab, Muslim, South Asian or Sikh-Americans. Over 140 of these incidents have resulted in local or state criminal prosecutions; nearly 20 have resulted in federal criminal prosecutions as well. We have, in addition, brought suit against a school district for prohibiting a student from wearing her *hijab*.

I do not mean to suggest that such practices are occurring at present in your state. Rather, I am writing to you, and to your colleagues in other states, to request assistance in letting school officials know that such practices are inconsistent with federal law and should not be tolerated.

As we approach the third anniversary of September 11, 2001, we must all recognize that our differences provide an invaluable opportunity for further education, and must not lead, rather, to greater separation. I thank you in advance for your leadership and assistance in addressing this issue.

Sincerely,

R. Alexander Acosta
Assistant Attorney General