

Sikhs permitted to wear ceremonial daggers in Olympic venues

BY RANDY SHORE, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 16, 2009 11:31 AM



The Kirpan is a Sikh religious symbol comparable to the Christian cross.

Photograph by: AFP Files, AFP Files

VANCOUVER — Sikhs will be permitted to wear ceremonial daggers less than 7.5 inches in length to Vancouver 2010 Winter Games venues, the RCMP's Vancouver 2010 Integrated Security Unit announced Thursday.

The dagger, called a kirpan, is one of the articles of faith that all observant Sikhs must wear.

To be admitted to Olympic venues, Sikhs wearing the kirpan must notify security personnel before being screened for admittance. The blade may be no longer than four inches and must be worn beneath the clothing, secured in a sheath.

The kirpan must be worn with all five Sikh articles of faith, including uncut hair, a wooden comb to secure the hair often worn in combination with a turban, an iron bracelet and a cotton singlet.

“These rules are consistent with the normal practices of Sikhs,” said Palbinder Shergill, legal counsel for the World Sikh Organization. “It’s a very positive step towards ensuring that Vanoc’s security needs are protected, but also ensuring that we accommodate the needs of different minorities.”

The RCMP sought advice about creating rules for wearing kirpans from the Sikh community through its community relations group, which includes members of many of the city's religious and ethnic groups, the B.C. Multi-Faith Action Society and the World Sikh Organization.

The consultation took several months, according to Shergill.

Research conducted by the RCMP's Olympic security unit suggested that violence involving kirpans is extremely rare and that allowing them into venues will not incur additional risk.

"The new guidelines provide reasonable accommodation for religious freedoms as defined by Canadian laws and values, while clearly identifying the conditions under which the kirpan may be worn," according to a statement from the Olympic security unit.

The Supreme Court of Canada in 2006 paved the way for kirpans to be allowed in all public places. The court ruled unanimously in favour of a 17-year-old Montreal high-school student who was forced to leave the public school system after the local school board banned him from wearing the dagger as an article of faith, claiming it was a potentially dangerous weapon.

The court noted that in 100 years that Sikhs had been wearing kirpans in school, not a single incidence of violence had ever been recorded and that it was likely less dangerous than a pair of scissors or a baseball bat, both commonly found in schools.

"The law is what it is," said Shergill. "What's important is that this decision is consistent with the values that we all share as Canadians."

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