

21 January 2021

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We wish you the very best as your administration tackles the COVID-19 pandemic and the myriad of other equally serious and urgent challenges at home and abroad.

On behalf of the Sikh diaspora and the global human rights community, we want to ensure that you are paying attention to the ongoing volatile crisis involving Indian farmers and the need for your administration to hold Prime Minister Modi's government accountable to its citizens' most basic human and civil rights, including peaceful protest.

Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for over half of India's population,¹ and more than 85% are farming on five acres or less.² Since September, farmers from Punjab, Haryana, and across India have been courageously protesting Indian Prime Minister Modi's rushed passage of three agricultural laws.³ These laws drastically deregulate the agriculture sector without any significant protections for farmers, giving corporate entrants unprecedented control over India's food supply and further devastating the majority of India's small farmers.⁴ For farmers who have been suffering the unbearable financial consequences of an Indian government that has ignored their ecological and economic plight for decades (exemplified by thousands of debt-induced suicides a year), these draconian laws are the final blow.⁵ Up to a million Indians have been peacefully protesting on the borders of New Delhi since Thanksgiving.

¹ Agriculture in India: Information About Indian Agriculture & Its Importance, Indian Brand Equity Foundation, (Dec. 30, 2020), *available at* <https://www.ibef.org/industry/agriculture-india.aspx#:~:text=Agriculture%20is%20the%20primary%20source,stood%20at%204%25%20in%20FY20>

² Anushree Fadnavis and Mayank Bhardwaj, Delhi police back off after scuffle with farmers, allow peaceful protest, Reuters, (Nov. 27, 2020), *available at* <https://www.reuters.com/article/india-farms-protests/delhi-police-back-off-after-scuffle-with-farmers-allow-peaceful-protest-idUSKBN2870EC>

³ Indian Farmers Lead Historic Strike & Protests Against Narendra Modi, Neoliberalism & Inequality, Democracy NOW!, (Dec. 3, 2020), *available at* https://www.democracynow.org/2020/12/3/india_protests_modi_neoliberal_reforms

⁴ C K Manoj, Bihar scrapped APMC Act, mandi system 14 years ago; here's what it did to farmers, DownToEarth, (Dec. 7, 2020), *available at* <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/agriculture/bihar-scrapped-apmc-act-mandi-system-14-years-ago-here-s-what-it-did-to-farmers-74534>

⁵ P. C. Bodh, Farmers' Suicides in India: A Policy Malignancy, (2019), *available at* https://books.google.com/books?id=64iUDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT23&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false



Despite the winter cold and desperate conditions that have now cost the lives of dozens of protestors, the farmers remain resolute that they will not disembark from their cause until the laws are repealed. As they continue to engage in good faith, the farmers' resolve to repeal the laws is in an effort towards critical agricultural reform that serves the interests of farmers and laborers and not just corporate entities. Further, they know that these laws will prevent their ability to protect their rights as judicial jurisdiction has been removed through these new bills.⁶ Their thinking is simple: I might die protesting for my family's rights today, but I will be disenfranchised and bonded to labor under large monopolies that benefit only corporations if these new laws apply to my livelihood tomorrow.

The farmers are planning for a tractor rally on January 26, India's Republic Day, which organizers have guaranteed will be peaceful.

While the protests remain peaceful, the response from the Indian government and security forces has not. Attempts to squash the peaceful protests have included blockades, the destruction of roads, the use of water cannons and tear gas, and other forms of violence.⁷ The government's violent response has escalated whenever additional citizens show support in their home states and attempt to join the protestors on the outskirts of Delhi. At present, the close to million protestors remain blocked out of their own capital by barbed wire and surrounded by armed paramilitary forces; as we approach the scheduled January 26 protest, the serious threats of use of force by the Indian government are dramatically increasing.

Moreover, the government and its intelligence services are suppressing and intimidating supporters and aid organizations through issuing indiscriminate and vague legal notices, auditing financials, and even arresting supporters on souped-up charges.⁸ This follows a pattern of the Modi government's suppression of human rights of marginalized communities, which has also included financially paralyzing nonprofit organizations, exemplified when Amnesty International was forced to shut offices across India last year.⁹ Meanwhile, Indian media, which ranks 142nd on the global press freedom index, continues to attempt to falsely frame these protestors as extremists or terrorists, while the support for the farmers across the country and world swells.¹⁰

⁶ P. Sainath, Did You Think the New Laws Were Only About the Farmers?, *The Wire*, (Dec. 9, 2020), *available at* <https://thewire.in/rights/farm-laws-legal-rights-constitution>

⁷ Bilal Kuchay, Thousands of farmers march to Indian capital defying tear gas, *Al Jazeera*, (Nov. 27, 2020), *available at* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/27/indian-farmers-clash-with-police-in-protest-over-market-reform>

⁸ Sandeep Singh, As Farm Law Protests Continue, NIA Sees 'Anti-National' Plot, Summons Activists, *The Wire*, (Jan. 16, 2021), *available at* <https://thewire.in/rights/nia-summons-activists-linked-to-farm-law-protests-suspects-conspiracy-against-india>

⁹ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Ben Doherty, Amnesty to halt work in India due to government 'witch-hunt', *The Guardian*, (Sep. 29, 2020), *available at* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/29/amnesty-to-halt-work-in-india-due-to-government-witch-hunt>

¹⁰ Data of press freedom ranking 2020, *Reporters Without Borders*, (2020), *available at* https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table

We urge the White House to issue a statement in advance of the January 26 protest that reminds the Indian government that the world is watching, and that the right to peacefully assemble and protest is an essential part of every democracy and it must not be met by government-sanctioned violence or intimidation in any form.

We also urge the State Department to closely monitor the alarming frequency and severity of Indian government sanctioned-retaliation in response to democratically protected dissent; this includes the unwarranted investigations, charges, and arrests made against the farmers, protestors, and those who support the movement.

And finally, building off President Obama's February 2015 remarks regarding India's abysmal record protecting religious rights, we strongly encourage the Biden Administration to take actionable efforts to hold Prime Minister Modi's government accountable for their past and ongoing human rights abuses, including the severe policies and measures that continue to fail to protect the equal rights of minorities in India.¹¹

As President-Elect, you issued a statement on International Human Rights Day that promised to "stand with human rights defenders here in the United States and the world over as we put universal rights and strengthening democracy at the center of our efforts to meet the challenges of the 21st century."¹²

This priority has never felt more necessary domestically than it does so now. As you work to demonstrate this leadership at home, the human rights crisis in India is an immediate opportunity to re-establish that leadership abroad.

Most respectfully,



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cc: The Vice President
The Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

¹¹ Frank Jack Daniel and Roberta Rampton, In parting shot, Obama prods India on religious freedom, Reuters, (Jan. 27, 2021), *available at* <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-obama/in-parting-shot-obama-prods-india-on-religious-freedom-idUSKBN0L00FD20150127>

¹² Press Release, Statement by President-elect Joe Biden on Human Rights Day, Biden-Harris Transition, (Dec. 10, 2020), *available at* <https://buildbackbetter.gov/press-releases/statement-by-president-elect-joe-biden-on-human-rights-day/>