

Descendants of passengers on ill-fated ship call on Ottawa



MARK VAN MANEN/VANCOUVER SUN

Members of the Sikh community (from left) Tarlochan Singh Randhawa, Balbir Singh Saggu and Swarn Singh Gill, are calling for compensation for descendants of Komagata Maru passengers denied entry in Vancouver in 1914.

Komagata Maru kin want amends

BY KIM BOLAN
VANCOUVER SUN

VANCOUVER | Descendants of passengers aboard the ill-fated *Komagata Maru* want to open discussions with the federal government about a formal apology and possible compensation over Canada's racist immigration laws early this century.

Three grandsons and a great-grandson of some of those aboard the infamous ship that tried to land in Vancouver in 1914 gathered in Richmond Monday to address community leaders and the media about a coordinated strategy on the issue.

Jas Toor said his grandfather was arrested as an independence leader after he was forced back to India with the other 375 on the chartered vessel.

"My grandfather and other passengers on that ship were jailed for at least two years," Toor said. "We are looking for the help of all our politicians.... An official apology we expect from the government."

Tejpal Singh Sandhu was at Monday's meeting representing his great-grandfather Gurdit Singh, who chartered the ship to travel from India to Canada.

Sandhu said the South Asian community in Canada must unite and come up with a com-

mon plan before entering into formal discussions with the government.

"This meeting is the first initiative taken by us," said Sandhu, who was recently accepted as an immigrant to Canada — 92 years after his relative sought to come here. "We will try to find more and more families and we will form a committee."

The *Komagata Maru* arrived in Vancouver Harbour in May 1914, but immigration officials refused to allow the passengers, mostly Sikhs, to disembark. Local community leaders with the Khalsa Diwan Society lobbied on their behalf for two months and raised more than \$7,000 for a legal challenge, but

in the end the vessel was forced back to Calcutta.

Because many aboard were leaders or sympathizers of the Ghadr party, which was fighting for independence, the British opened fire when the ship docked, killing several aboard and taking others prisoner.

Suki Badh, of Sher-E-Punjab Radio, organized the meeting, saying Monday that the time has come to begin a dialogue with the Canadian government.

"We feel this is a timely event," Badh said to about 50 gathered at his radio station's offices.

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Komagata Maru apology asked for

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He said the Conservative government's recent decision to formally apologize for the Chinese head tax paid by early immigrants from that community has many Indo-Canadians asking about the same for the *Komagata Maru* incident.

"There is a groundswell of support," he said.

Three NDP MLAs attended Monday's meeting, as did Liberal MP Sukh Dhaliwal and former Conservative MP Gurmant Grewal, who said his MP wife Nina was unable to attend.

Sohan Singh Deo, a former president of the Khalsa Diwan Society, noted how much work has already been done to commemorate the *Komagata Maru* by community leaders over the years.

He urged the descendants to build on the lobbying and research that now exists to forge a united community approach.

Many at the meeting suggested the government might want to fund an educational program or a *Komagata Maru* chair at a B.C. university instead of a compensation package aimed at individuals.

Burnaby Edmonds NDP MLA Raj Chouhan said that whatever is demanded must reflect the wishes of the whole community.

"We want a clear and unequivocal apology from the government of Canada," Chouhan said. "We have an apology for the Chinese head tax. We have an apology for Japanese internment. Why not an apology for the *Komagata Maru*?"

Dhaliwal said the issue is not just for the Indo-Canadian community, but is of importance to all Canadians.

"The government cannot pit one community against another," Dhaliwal said, adding that South Asians should also support the struggles of other minority communities with similar issues.

Grewal said Prime Minister Stephen Harper is willing to meet with Indo-Canadians on the issue.

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