

Diplomat demands answers

Appeal launched by a man previously named as a consul-general

BY AYESHA BHATTY
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VANCOUVER | The would-be consul-general of the Canadian diplomatic mission in the Indian state of Punjab is on a mission to ferret out why he was denied the position just five months after his appointment was trumpeted in both Ottawa and India.

Bhupinder Singh Liddar, 57, has initiated a formal appeal and legal proceedings in the hopes of getting an explanation for why the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) denied him security clearance.

"It's a bizarre situation," said Liddar, who has been offered no reasons for why he was denied clearance in March even though he was given the position last October.

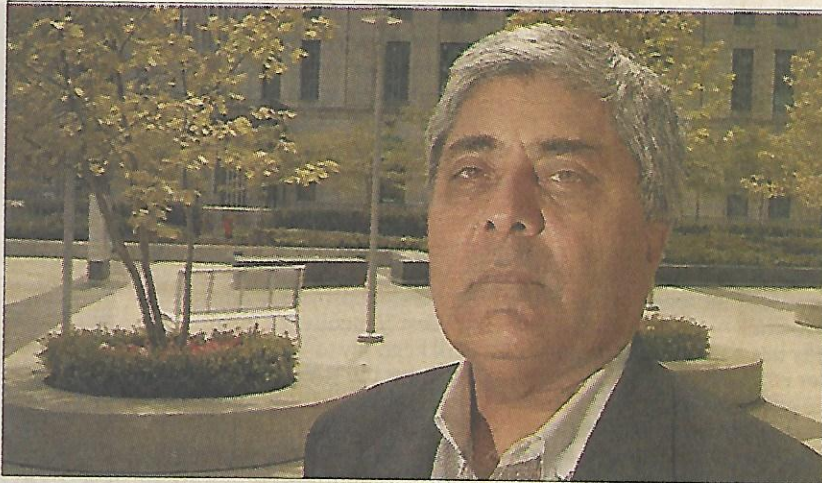
Liddar was in Vancouver Sunday meeting with members of Vancouver's Sikh community to address concerns about the development and to dispel rumours circulating about his background.

Radio Punjab commentator Harjinder Thind said Liddar — who was born in Nairobi and moved to Ottawa in 1977, where he has worked as a journalist and parliamentary researcher — is a stranger to Vancouver's Sikh community.

"He has become more known since his dismissal," said Thind, adding: "Many of B.C.'s Sikhs would have been happier if Raj Chahal [former prime minister Jean Chretien's top adviser for Western Canada] had been appointed to the position."

Liddar's appointment was made through an order-in-council on Oct. 21, approved by the governor-general and publicly announced by Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham. He was then flown to Chandigarh at Chretien's invitation, where he was introduced as Canada's first consul-general in Chandigarh.

"I was on stage with Jean Chretien, the chief minister of Punjab State, and other Canadian members of Parliament. Mr. Chretien makes his speech, introducing me as the new consul-general, and then he shakes my hand and says, 'This is your first day on the job,'" he said.



PETER BATTISTONI/VANCOUVER SUN

Bhupinder Singh Liddar wants to know why he failed security clearance.

Liddar returned to Ottawa on Nov. 3, where he planned to remain until renovations were complete at the consulate. He said foreign affairs gave him an office, issued him a building pass and put him on the payroll.

He attended briefings on bilateral issues concerning Canada and India, and even travelled to a meeting in Asia with the heads of diplomatic missions at the expense of the department.

Then in March, Liddar said foreign affairs advised him he had not passed security requirements for reasons it would not disclose to him. He said he was offered two options: to accept a \$60,000 settlement or to appeal the CSIS decision with the Security Intelligence Review Committee.

Liddar called the settlement offer "ridiculous and insulting," adding that it has caused him great embarrassment to have his reputation tarnished.

"I know I have done nothing wrong," he said. "Until I am told what the concerns are, my life is in limbo. We operate under the rule of law, not the rule of secrecy. I am appealing because this should not happen to any Canadian."

Liddar said he does not know whether the government flip-flop was motivated by politics or legitimate security concerns.

"Whatever the reasons are, they need to be made public," he said, adding the only way to get at the findings of the security review is to appeal the decision in October.

Liddar said he is also launching a lawsuit against the government alleging negligence and misrepresentation,

but said his lawyer has not determined an appropriate amount for damages as yet.

During the appeal, Liddar will continue to draw a \$100,000-plus annual salary.

"This will tide me over until the end of the process," said Liddar, who was the publisher and editor of *Diplomat & International Canada* magazine. Before accepting the posting, he also hosted a weekly hour-long show on CPAC and was a columnist with the *Hill Times*.

"I sold the magazine, stopped the CPAC program and stopped writing my column," said Liddar, adding that he is concerned his chances of employment could be reduced because his image has been tarnished.

"Despite what has happened, no bitterness has set in," said Liddar. "I would still accept the position if it was offered to me because it is a phenomenal honour to serve this country."

Former federal minister Herb Dhaliwal, who backed Liddar for the post, said he was "just as surprised and shocked as a lot of other people about why [Liddar] finds himself in this situation."

He added: "He is a well-respected person who is well-known in Ottawa. He's done an excellent job of bringing together the diplomatic community, the politicians and the media ... I supported him very much for that position as the consul-general in Punjab. I still support that and I hope that he can resolve this issue and take the position because I think he can do a great job."