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Sikh holds burning Indian flag in front of riot police during Vancouver demonstration yesterday.

Sikh protest disrupts ceremony

WEST VANCOUVER (CP) — About 300 Sikhs commemorated Indian Independence Day yesterday by attempting to storm the Indian Consul-General's home in the posh British Properties district to disrupt a flag-raising ceremony.

Two men were arrested during the demonstration after the rear and side windows of Consul-General Kavita Sharma's car were broken and after the crowd tried to force its way past West Vancouver police and RCMP on to the lawn of the Consul-General's home.

The demonstration began around 9 a.m. when the Sikhs arrived in the exclusive neighborhood in school buses. Manmohan Singh, a spokesman for the Sikh Students Federation, said the demonstrators were determined to prevent the Indian flag from being raised in front of the Consul-General's home.

Mr. Sharma had invited about 60 guests to his home for a morning celebration that was to have included raising the orange, green and white flag.

The attempt by the Sikh men, women and children to burst into the party was stopped by police.

However, a standoff developed with about 100 of the 300 demonstrators on the lawn between two lines of police, while the other demonstrators stayed on the street on the other side of a high hedge.

During the standoff, the RCMP — who are responsible for the safety of diplomats — called in reinforcements including officers equipped with truncheons, plexi-glass shields and tear gas.

Police were unable to estimate how many officers were present but just before the crowd dispersed, more than 100 officers surrounded the house. Others were blocking off streets in the area or stationed throughout the neighborhood.

Just after noon, Mr. Singh walked down the driveway of Mr. Sharma's home and told the Sikhs it was over.

"We had to tell this stupid Consul-General that we cannot celebrate this day," he said. "Today we are a minority (in India) and they want to wipe us out."

Earlier this summer, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered troops to invade the Sikhs' Golden Temple in Amritsar. In the course of that action, several thousand Sikhs were killed.

Satnam Singh Johal, secretary of the Khalsa Diwan Society, said the Sikhs won a victory by delaying the flag-raising until after noon.

"You do things before noon for happiness," he said. "The afternoon is for funerals and sadness."

"It is Independence Day in India, but the Sikhs do not have independence.

August 15 is a black day for the Sikh people. We don't like the Government traditions and we are not satisfied with the Government."

As the last of the school buses full of Sikhs — many of them wearing blue T-shirts with "Khalistan" in gold Indian letters — drove away, Mr. Sharma raised the flag.

Khalistan is the Sikhs' name for the independent state they wish to establish in India's Punjab region.

After raising the flag and reading a prepared statement from Indian President Zail Singh, Mr. Sharma apologized to his guests for the inconvenience caused by the demonstration.

"As the president said in his message, we Indians are known for love and compassion and freedom for all and fair treatment of minorities. I request all of you not to have any feelings of rancor towards any communities."

The Consul-General went on to say, "Violence is resorted to by cowards."

When questioned by reporters, Mr. Sharma said generally the flag-raising celebration of Independence Day is held in the morning, but "there is no significance to raising it after noon. You can raise it anytime."

The Sikhs planned to have their own celebration at 5 p.m. at the temple in Vancouver.