

Sikhs praise Fleet Bank's bias accord

BY SAM ALI

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

In a decision hailed by the nation's Sikh community, Fleet Bank yesterday settled a discrimination suit filed by a New Jersey businessman, at the same time agreeing to explicitly recognize the religious group's rights.

Sikh leaders, who previously had threatened a boycott of the bank over the New Jersey case, called Fleet's written pledge on the Sikh community the first of its kind in the nation.

"It is the first time any U.S. cor-

poration has publicly stated it will accommodate Sikhs as full and equal employees and customers," said Manjit Singh, executive director of the Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force, a Washington-based advocacy group.

The agreement with Singh's group came in tandem with Fleet's settlement of a religious discrimination suit filed by Inderjeet Singh Chowdhary, 45, who claimed employees at the bank's Carteret branch refused to let him open a \$250,000 certificate of deposit and then asked him to leave.

As a practicing member of the Sikh faith, Chowdhary wears a turban and has a beard.

Chowdhary, an American citizen and a former merchant marine captain, will be paid an undisclosed sum under the confidential settlement, said his lawyer, Ravinder S. Bhalla of the Newark law firm

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Krovatin & Associates.

While many corporations have nondiscrimination policies on their books and tolerate religious and cultural differences, Bhalla called the agreement with Fleet a "big step" for the rights of Sikhs, who are mandated by their religion to wear things like turbans, kara-steel bracelets and small daggers.

"If Fleet Bank, one of the largest financial institutions in the country, recognizes the right of Sikhs to maintain their faith and retain their employment and their status, then why shouldn't others?" Bhalla said.

There are an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 Sikhs in New Jersey and a half million nationwide. While members of the Sikh faith are scattered across the globe, most come from the northern Indian state of Punjab, on the border with Pakistan.

Under its agreement with the Washington advocacy group, New Jersey's largest bank will educate employees about Sikh Americans and develop financial solutions tailored to the state's Sikh community.

In a joint statement, Fleet also promised to closely monitor and "vigorantly enforce its anti-discrimination policies."

"We believe we have come to a resolution of this misunderstanding that was mutually agreeable, and we're pleased we had such a productive dialogue with SMART," said Steve Lubetkin, a Fleet spokesman. "We feel we

have simply reaffirmed the beliefs and policies we already have in place."

In his lawsuit, Chowdhary claimed he was denied service when he went to Fleet's Carteret branch on Aug. 21 to open a fixed-rate 15-month certificate of deposit.

Chowdhary said he was filing out the paperwork with a teller when Carteret branch Vice President Alicia Eagleston stopped the application process and called the teller to her desk, according to the suit.

When the teller returned, she told Chowdhary, without explanation, he was no longer allowed to open a certificate of deposit, the suit charged.

Eagleston then escorted Chowdhary to the door and asked him to leave.

Chowdhary — who operates two Burger King franchises, one in Carteret and another in New York City — said he wrote several follow-up letters to Eagleston and to Fleet's customer care department, requesting an explanation in the weeks following the incident.

Unable to resolve the matter, he filed his lawsuit in May.

Fleet denies any discrimination took place against Chowdhary that day, according to Lubetkin. The spokesman added that the Carteret branch is a multi-ethnic workplace with a diverse employee base. Several dialects of Indian, including Punjabi, are spoken there.

Staff writer Mark Mueller contributed to this report.