

Press Trust of India

Sikh Brothers awarded over USD 5 mn in discrimination suit.

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Washington, June 21 (PTI) A Federal Jury has asked oil giant Arco to pay over USD 5 million to three Sikh brothers who filed a suit against the company saying they were harassed discriminated, and eventually dropped, media reported on Friday.

The Seattle District Court ruled in favour of the Bains brothers-Harinder Paul, Gurinder, and Gagandeep-on Tuesday, ordering Arco to pay more than USD 5 million in damages, The Seattle Times reported.

The verdict, the brothers said, is vindication of their company Flying B - a Gas station chain-which Arco said was fired because of safety violations and poor performance.

"This is telling them they cannot treat us like this," Paul said. "This is sending a message to Arco and people like that. For us, it is a milestone."

But Arco insisted the contract with Flying B was terminated because of safety violations adding it may appeal the verdict. "The company does not tolerate discrimination by its employees. The man the Bains said was particularly vicious to Flying B workers has gone through counseling", said Dan Cummings, an Arco spokesman.

In June 1999, after the Olympic gasoline Pipe Line in Bellingham ruptured, killing three people, Arco needed another way to transport gasoline from its Cherry Point refinery in Ferndale to its tank farm in Seattle. The company began hiring tanker trucks to do the job, and Flying B took the contract, for which it bought six trucks.

The brothers said, an Arco employee harassed them and their other Indian drivers repeatedly calling them 'rag heads', "diaper heads" and

"camel jockeys" because of their heritage. Two of the three brothers wear turbans and beards.

The Bains family who arrived in the US since 1987 and settled in Okanogan had set up Flying B in 1996. Paul said the discrimination began on the first day itself, when he tried to make conversation with a supervisor at the Seattle gas pumps.

For the seven months Flying B contracted with Arco, its employees, many of them Sikhs or from India, were almost constantly abused by Arco workers, Bains said. They were insulted, made to wait longer than other drivers for their trucks to be filled and kept out of the lounge where other drivers ducked out of rain and cold.

But over time, the Bains were accepted in their community and during the trial with Arco, a number of residents made the drive to Seattle to support the brothers.

The brothers complained first to the Arco manager in Seattle and then to the company's headquarters in Los Angeles. Nothing, they said, was done to change the situation.

The months of abuse from Arco employees were not just painful, but proof that the loss of their contract was because of who they are, not how they performed, the brothers said.

Losing the job forced the brothers to idle the six trucks they had purchased and lay off nine drivers.

With the verdict in, the Bains, now US citizens, said they just want to get back to running their business.

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