

Three killed as racist attacks increase in US

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21 September 2001

Hundreds of attacks have been committed against innocent Asian-Americans and Arab-Americans over the past week, including assaults, firebombings, acts of vandalism against mosques, and at least three murders. The victims have been targeted because of their skin color or because they wore turbans, veils or other outward signs of Muslim religion or Asian origin.

Two murders on Saturday, September 15 have been definitively linked to a racist backlash after the destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon. An Arizona man went on a shooting rampage, fatally wounding the Sikh owner of a Chevron gas station in the Phoenix suburb of Mesa, then shooting at—but missing—a Lebanese-born worker at a Mobil station nearby. He then fired into the home of an Afghan immigrant family, hitting no one.

Police arrested Frank Roque, 42, on two counts of attempted murder. He shouted, “I stand for America all the way,” as he was led away in handcuffs. The gas station owner, Balbir Singh Sodhi, had a wife and three adult children. He had been planning to return to India to live with one of his sons.

The killing followed several days of incidents directed at Sikhs in the Phoenix area. “We’ve had people that work in convenience stores and gas stations and have been unable to work this week because of overt harassment,” a Sikh spokesman said. Because of their distinctive beards and turbans, Sikhs, who follow a separate religion, “look more like bin Laden than the Muslims do,” he said.

The second killing was also of an immigrant from South Asia, a Pakistani Muslim, Waqar Hassan Choudhry, shot to death in his grocery store in Pleasant Grove, Texas, a middle-class suburb of Dallas. A considerable sum of money was left in the cash register, and police said they were investigating the possibility of a hate crime. Choudhry had lived in the US for 10 years; he was married with four daughters.

In San Gabriel, California, an Egyptian-born Christian, Adelal Karas, was shot to death inside the International Market, his family-owned business. Karas, a Coptic Christian who fled Egypt citing persecution of his religion, was mistaken for a Muslim by the attacker, who argued with him first.

Other acts of violence have included:

- * an attack on a Moroccan gas station attendant in Palos Heights, Illinois
- * the beating of two Muslim girls at Moraine Valley College in Palos Hills, Illinois
- * an attack on an Evansville, Indiana mosque, when a man rammed his car into the building at a high speed
- * a similar car assault on a mosque in Cleveland, Ohio
- * an assault on a Pakistani woman, nearly run over in a suburban Long Island parking lot
- * an arson attempt against a Seattle mosque, in which an armed assailant was arrested

All told there were over 350 attacks reported to Arab-American and Muslim-American civil rights groups, and the FBI admitted that more than 50 cases of suspected federal hate crimes had been opened since the World Trade Center atrocity. There are 5.5 million non-Arab Muslims, one million Arab Muslims, and 2.5 million Arab Christians living in the United States.

The New York City area, Detroit and Los Angeles have the largest concentrations of Arab-Americans. Immigrants from South Asia, including India and Pakistan, live in virtually every major US urban center. The largest concentration of Afghan-Americans, some 40,000, is in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Several hundred South Asian, Arab and Muslim Americans rallied near the US Capitol in Washington Wednesday, calling for an end to attacks on innocent US citizens and immigrants who merely “looked like the enemy.”

James Zogby, president of the Arab American

Institute in Washington, said hate crimes only added to the enormous toll of victims of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. “Maybe 5,000 have died. We don’t know, the numbers may grow higher,” he said. “Enough death. Enough hate. Enough violence. Enough. As Americans, we must say it should end.”

At a ceremony near the memorial to the 120,000 Japanese-Americans forced into internment camps after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, over 75 leaders of South Asian, Arab and Muslim American groups urged the nation not to repeat that era’s mistakes.

Leaders of several US Muslim groups complained publicly Thursday that FBI agents investigating the terrorist attack were harassing and intimidating Arabs and Muslims, making unfounded public allegations against Muslim organizations and creating a climate of intimidation by invading workplaces and college classrooms to detain Muslims for questioning.

Yaser Bushnaq, president of Solidarity US, the umbrella group formed by the Muslim organizations, told a news conference in Washington that Muslims should have a lawyer at all times when speaking with federal investigators. “We advise them not to talk and to speak to the FBI except with the presence of a legal counsel and also to remind them that they have the full right not to speak to the FBI if they elect to do so,” Bushnaq said.

The FBI refused to comment on the allegations.

In one incident, FBI agents sought to interrupt a prayer service at a mosque in Silver Spring, Maryland to show photographs to participants. When denied access, the agents stood outside writing down the license plate numbers of vehicles in the mosque parking lot.

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee said that FBI agents had refused Arab-Americans access to lawyers while they were being questioned. It advised cooperation with the probe of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, but said that Arab-Americans had the right to seek legal counsel and to refuse to speak with the FBI.

In an incident which typifies the dragnet methods being employed, an Akron, Ohio woman was visited by the FBI demanding to see her son, Mohammad Atta. When she told the agents that her son, while bearing the same name as the suspected hijacker, was only five

years old, the agents refused to leave until they saw his birth certificate, as well as the papers proving that his father, Abdul Atta, had been killed the year before in a robbery of his grocery store. The boy was not at home, since he had just started kindergarten.

A relatively sympathetic account of the plight of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans appeared in *USA Today* Thursday. “We don’t want to have 7 million American Muslims hiding in their basements,” said Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “But I know a Muslim man who has a Bosnian wife, and he’s sending his family back to Bosnia for safety. That tells you something.”



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