

# Faith and rights groups call for hate crime hearings

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) Amid a rash of recent attacks that are being investigated as hate crimes, a coalition of more than 150 organizations is calling on the Senate Judiciary Committee to conduct hearings next month with the aim of revamping hate crime legislation.

Led by the Sikh Coalition, the group of civil rights and religious organizations issued a letter on August 21 urging committee chairman Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and ranking member Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, to look into hate crimes and hate groups in the United States.

The letter noted that the shooter that killed six at a Wisconsin Sikh temple, or gurdwara, in August had ties to hate groups. It also cited 10 Islamic institutions in seven states that have been vandalized, shot at, or burned in the past month.

"We want to do everything in our power to make sure what happened in Oak Creek never happens to anyone again," said Rajdeep Singh, director of law and policy for the Sikh Coalition.

"Given the persistence of hate crimes and sheer number of hate groups in the United States, we want our policymakers to be proactive about uprooting bigotry in the United States."

An aide with the Senate Judiciary Committee said no firm plans have been made to schedule a hearing, but expected several members would be interested in holding one.

An FBI investigation reported 6,628 hate crimes in 2010, the last year for which data is available. Of these, 47 percent were motivated by race, 20 percent by religion, 19 percent by sexual orientation, and 13 percent by ethnicity or national origin.

The letter sought greater protection from hate crimes motivated by race, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, disability and immigration status.

The Southern Poverty Law Center reported 1,018 active hate groups in the United States in 2011, a 60 percent rise since 2000.

Hate groups "have beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics," the SPLC states on its website. A hate group designation does not imply that a group advocates or engages in violence or criminal activities.

The letter acknowledged the importance of recent legislation like the 2009 Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which extends hate-crime law to include crimes motivated by a victim's gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.

However, the letter also criticized the system of voluntary reporting set up under the 1990 Hate Crime Statistics Act. The letter writers said that understates the true number of hate crimes in the U.S.

In a related development, the Sikh Coalition welcomed a Thursday letter from 19 U.S. senators calling on Attorney General Eric Holder to have the Justice Department track hate crimes against Sikhs.

"Until we have a more comprehensive understanding of the number and type of hate crimes committed against Sikhs, our law enforcement agencies will not be able to allocate the appropriate level of personnel and other resources to prevent and respond to these crimes," the senators wrote Holder.

Congress reconvenes September 10.

(Adelle M. Banks contributed to this report.)