

Sikh vigils greet violence with peace, food

by [Chris Lisee](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) In the shadow of the White House, as speakers called for unity, trays of food circulated the audience: wraps, potato chips, and choley chawal, a chickpea and rice dish.

The candlelight vigil for the victims of the Oak Creek, Wis., Sikh temple shooting symbolically completed what a gunman interrupted on Sunday (Aug. 5) -- the langar, a Sikh ritual meal for anyone who wishes to take part.

Wednesday's vigil was one of many nationwide to respond to violence with peace as the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund called for a "National Day of Remembrance and Solidarity."

The attack Sunday "attempted to make Americans afraid of their fellow neighbors, and it is something that the Sikh community has faced time and time again," said Sartaj Singh Dhami, co-director of RestoringThePride.com, a Sikh advocacy group.

"Through resolve, through respect, we will overcome. This is a gift that Sikhs can give to all Americans."

Organizers chose Washington's Lafayette Park for their vigil, across the street from the White House, where its flag stood at half-mast in honor of the six killed and three injured in the attack.

The alleged killer is Wade Michael Page, a 40-year-old Army veteran and former frontman for a white supremacist band. It is speculated that Page mistook Sikhs for Muslims.

Sikh men have been confused for Muslims in the past for keeping their unshorn hair under a turban. Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh gas station owner in Arizona, was gunned down days after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

But hate is wrong no matter who it targets, said anti-Islamophobia activist Khuram Zaman.

"When this first happened, I thought it was important to explain what the difference is," he said, referring to the attack at the Oak Creek temple. "But at the same time, it doesn't really matter what the faith is. It's just wrong to kill people in their place of worship."

Speakers invoked solidarity with members of a Joplin, Mo., mosque, which burned to the ground on Monday. Many believe it was a hate crime. Authorities are investigating.

"The reason for us to be out here is to take a stand against hatred and bigotry that drives people to do what they did, both on Sunday, at the Wisconsin gurdwara (temple) and Monday at the Joplin mosque," said Gursean Singh, who helped organize the vigil.

Speakers emphasized that Sikhism is a peaceful religion that views all people as equal. They said the tragedy presents an opportunity to inform the public about Sikhism, the fifth largest religion in the world.

It is unknown how many Sikhs live in the United States. Estimates range from 200,000 to 700,000.

As gatherers lit one another's candles in the vigil and held a moment of silence, the names of the victims were read. The makeshift langar came to a close.

"The philosophy of our nation is that we're a nation of pluralism, we accept people of different faiths. How I see it, an attack against one is an attack against all," Zaman said.

"When these sorts of incidents happen, the superior response is to respond with wisdom and love, and to have mercy."