

Friday, August 10th, 2012

# REMARKS FROM ATTORNEY GENERAL ERIC HOLDER AT THE OAK CREEK MEMORIAL SERVICE

ATTORNEY GENERAL ERIC HOLDER

OAK CREEK, WIS.  
(As prepared.)

I come to you today with a heavy heart, and with the knowledge that my words – or any words – are insufficient to convey the grief we all feel, to supply the answers we seek, or to provide the comfort for which we long. But I am here – on behalf of the President of the United States, on behalf of my colleagues at the Department of Justice, and on behalf of all the American people – to stand with you, to mourn with you, and to pray with you.

Although we have been brought together by an unspeakable, and devastating, tragedy – we are bound together by far more. We are united today – not only by a shared sense of loss, but also by a common belief in the healing power of faith, and in the universal principles that are glorified in our nation’s churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, Gurdwaras, and other houses of worship; but also by the principles of compassion, kindness, tolerance, inclusion, and love.

The ongoing American experiment was inspired by these ideals – and by the premise that people of diverse races, colors, creeds, faiths and ideologies can work together to build a society that is rooted in freedom, personal responsibility, and equality and opportunity for all. As President Obama has often said, “It is that fundamental belief that I am my brother’s keeper, [and] I am my sister’s keeper, that makes this country work.”

This is the idea that – **no matter where you come from or how you worship – once you are here, you are part of the American family. And this also is the story of the Sikh community in our country – a community that has contributed in innumerable ways to the greatness of America.**

These were the early immigrants who came to the West Coast in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to work in lumber mills, on railway lines, and as agricultural laborers – and who stayed, building and strengthening communities around the country, from Yuba City to New York City, from Miami to Milwaukee, to Washington, D.C.

There are public servants like **Dalip Singh Saund, the first Asian American ever elected to Congress; and Bhagat Singh Thind, a hero who fought for America in World War I,** and then fought to become a U.S. citizen.

We are talking about our neighbors and co-workers, our brothers and sisters, and the members of our American family – and of the Oak Creek community – who we remember today.

We gather to honor **Suveg Singh Khattrra**, a retired farmer who came to the Gurdwara to hear his native Punjabi, the language of his home and of the scriptures he loved. We celebrate the life of **Paramjit Kaur**, a proud mother who was always devoted to her two sons – Harpeet and Kamal – and to her faith. And we remember **Prakash Singh**, who just recently was overjoyed to be reunited with his wife and children from India — a nation that is both a trusted ally and a revered friend.

We also honor **Sita and Ranjit Singh**, brothers who were both priests at the Gurdwara, who devoted their lives to the practice of their faith and to the service of others. And we reflect on the extraordinary contributions of **Satwant Singh Kaleka** – a key leader and founder of the Gurdwara, who, in a split-second decision, didn't hesitate to put his own body between a deranged killer and his fellow worshippers. We will never know how many lives he saved last Sunday – or how many more he enriched during the many days and years he spent at his beloved Gurdwara, where he was so clearly dedicated to feeding the hungry, befriending the lonely, and reaching out to help those most in need.

Today, as we reflect on the lives and legacies of these six remarkable individuals, and keep in our hearts all those others harmed in the horrific attack, we also are reminded of the many other members of our family who have been taken from us far too suddenly – and far too soon – in other senseless acts of violence.

Unfortunately, for the Sikh community, this sort of violence has become all too common in recent years. In the recent past, too many Sikhs have been targeted and victimized simply because of who they are, how they look, and what they believe.

This is wrong. It is unacceptable. And it will not be tolerated. We must ask necessary questions of ourselves: what kind of nation do we truly want to have? Will we muster the courage to demand more of those who lead us and, just as importantly, of ourselves? What will we do to prevent that which has brought us here today from occurring in the future? We should sensibly discuss if there is a need to change our laws, and we should certainly discuss how we might change the hearts of those so filled with hate that the despicable act we mourn today could ever have occurred. For our nation's law enforcement community, our resolve to prevent acts of terrorism and combat crimes motivated by hatred has never been stronger. And that is precisely what happened here: an act of terrorism; an act of hatred; a crime that is anathema to the founding principles of our nation and to who we are as a people.

Last Sunday morning, this community witnessed the very worst of human kind. But for every minute, every hour, and every day since then, you have exemplified and inspired the very best in who we are.

That's what we saw in **the heroic actions of Lieutenant Brian Murphy and Officer Sam Lenda, two veterans of the Oak Creek Police Department, who did what law enforcement officials are called to do every single day – protect and serve their communities. Lieutenant**

**Murphy was shot nine times while coming to the aid of others. And when his fellow police officers arrived at the scene and offered to help him, he selflessly waved them off, ordering that they tend to the victims inside the Gurdwara first.**

We've also seen an outpouring of support – from the larger community here in Oak Creek and across the state of Wisconsin; from Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faith leaders; and from countless Americans nationwide who are truly heartbroken by what happened here on Sunday.

That's because Sunday's attack was not just an affront to the values of Sikhism. It was an attack on the values of America itself.

It's worth remembering that, later this year, we will commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Gurdwara in the United States. For hundreds of years, Gurdwaras all over the world have been places of sanctuary; places where all are welcome, where all are treated with equality and dignity, where all can find shelter and nourishment, and where all should be able to seek solace and to know peace.

Today, I wish that I could give each of you – as well as every member of our nation's Sikh community; and every other member of our American family – the peace that you seek. I can't do that. But I can make you a promise. I want you to know that your loss will fuel the ongoing work – being led by this Administration, by our nation's Department of Justice, and by our law enforcement community – to seek both answers and justice, to advance the investigation that's now underway, to identify and implement the solutions that we need to prevent future tragedies, and to build on the unprecedented steps that have been taken to respond to threats – and to prevent violence and discrimination – aimed at our Sikh and other religious communities. Protecting the safety and civil rights of every person in this country – in our schools and neighborhoods, in our workplaces and houses of worship – must, and will, remain a top priority for me and for all those who serve the American family.

**This is how we will honor the victims of Sunday's attacks. This is how we will strengthen the American family. This is how we will overcome today's pain and drive tomorrow's progress.**

**Sikhs know this because, for generations, you have taught the world that progress comes when we strive to understand, and when we celebrate our commonalities. We need you now, more than ever, to do what your ancestors have always done in times of adversity: show us what it means to rise above suffering and struggle; teach us the way to peace; and remind us that our faith – both in the divine and in each other – will allow us to transcend today's fears, to bridge today's divisions, to overcome today's sorrows, to feel the healing comfort of God's hand upon us, and to find strength in the enduring assurance that, everywhere and always, God is there.**

May God bless the members of our family- the American family- we remember today. May God bless each of you. And may God bless the United States of America.