

Beat: News

Gunman kills 3 at Jewish locations in Kansas on eve of Passover

-, 14.04.2014, 03:49 Time

USPA News - Three people were killed Sunday when a gunman opened fire at a Jewish community center and a nearby Jewish retirement center in Kansas, U.S. authorities said. A suspect - said to have shouted anti-Semitic slurs - was taken into custody.

The incident began at around 1:03 p.m. local time on Sunday when calls came in of shots fired at the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Overland Park, a city that is part of the Kansas City metropolitan area. Other 911 calls came in shortly after when shots rang out at the nearby Village Shalom Retirement Center. "We immediately understood we had an active shooter and went into our active shooter protocols and began to search for him with the best information we had," said Overland Park Police Chief John Douglass. "We saturated the area and I believe two of our officers found him in the school parking lot." Douglass said three people were shot and killed in the incident, two of them in or near a car at the Jewish Community Center and a third outside the retirement center. Two other people at the community center were also shot at but were not hit, the chief said, adding that it was unclear whether the two uninjured people had been deliberately targeted. "There were two individuals who were shot at, one extremely close," Douglass said at a news conference. "We have the back doors of the community center, which has sustained substantial damage. We're not certain if those were bullets that went past the original victims or whether it was deliberate and intentionally created." The suspect was described as a white male in his 70s who is not from Kansas and is not believed to have known the victims. Authorities said the motive for the shootings was not immediately clear, but witnesses reported hearing the suspect shout "Heil Hitler" after he was taken into custody. Douglass acknowledged that the suspect had made "several statements" while in the back of a police car but gave no specific details. "The suspect, in the back of the car, made several statements. We are sifting through and vetting those (reports) for accuracy and, number two, we're looking at them for evidentiary value," the police chief said when asked about the reported anti-Semitic slur. "It's too early to tell you what he may or may not have said, but we are trying to determine what that was at the time." The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which also investigates hate crimes, was also participating in the investigation. When later asked to clarify whether the shootings were being investigated as a possible hate crime, Douglass added: "We are investigating it as a hate crime, we are investigating it as a criminal act. We haven't ruled out anything." President Barack Obama described as "horrific" Sunday's shootings, which occurred on the eve of Passover. "Michelle and I offer our thoughts and prayers to the families and friends who lost a loved one and everyone affected by this tragedy," he said. "I have asked my team to stay in close touch with our federal, state and local partners and provide the necessary resources to support the ongoing investigation." Obama added: "While we do not know all of the details surrounding today's shooting, the initial reports are heartbreaking. I want to offer my condolences to all the families trying to make sense of this difficult situation and pledge the full support from the federal government as we heal and cope during this trying time." B'nai B'rith International, the world's oldest Jewish service organization, also extended its condolences to the families of the victims. "Unfortunately, this is not the first time there has been a shooting at a Jewish Community Center," the organization said in a statement. "Comments attributed to the shooter after police had him in custody demonstrate a blind hatred toward Jews." In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio said police were taking steps to ensure the safety of Jewish people during Passover. "The NYPD is taking all steps to ensure the safety and security of Jewish individuals and institutions as Passover is being ushered in," de Blasio said in a statement.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-2091/gunman-kills-3-at-jewish-locations-in-kansas-on-eve-of-passover.html>

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