

## **Sikh-Americans fear backlash after Orlando shooting**

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**Washington:** Sikh-Americans, who have faced hate crimes after every major terror attack, are fearing a backlash following the Orlando gay club shooting even as the Obama administration has assured them of their safety.

In a bid to allay growing concerns within the community, the White House sent one of its top officials to a gurdwara in the suburb of Washington DC yesterday to meet members of the Sikh community and local leadership to assure them about their safety and interest.

"We know, this is a time when some in the community fear unease," Cecilia Munoz, Director of the Domestic Policy Council at the White House, told PTI after her interaction with the Sikh community at the oldest gurdwara of Maryland -- Guru Nanak Foundation of America. She also attended 'sangat' with its members.

"I shared the work that the federal government is doing to make sure that every child is safe and secure, every person is feeling safe and secure in the places of worship and the places where they work and the places where they study," Munoz said, adding that there was no need to be fearful.

Her visit to the gurdwara was planned a few days ago but her presence was very timely in terms of the new wave of fear that has gripped the community because of the Orlando incident -- the deadliest mass shooting in America's history.

Omar Mateen, an Afghan-origin gunman who carried an assault rifle and a pistol into the gay club in Orlando in the wee hours of yesterday and killed 50 people while injuring 53 others, was later shot dead by the police.

"This is a country of great diversity. We cherish that diversity. We celebrate it. We feel great gratitude to the Sikh community for the many many contributions to the United States," Munoz said.

"It is fundamental to our democracy that people have freedom of worship, but also have freedom from fear," she said, adding that the Obama Administration has taken steps to address these challenges.

Paramvir Singh Soni, chairperson of the Guru Nanank Foundation of America, acknowledged that there is a sense of fear in the community and said the Sikh-Americans are touched by the steps being taken by US President Barack Obama in this regard.

"We are still looking for stronger actions against hate crimes. I think there we need to do some more work, but we are making progress," he said.

Singh said the community wants to have the next president as one who can address its challenge.

"Someone who is more open to the Sikh community, somebody who is more engaged," he said.

Dr Rajwant Singh, Washington-based chairman of the Sikh Council on Religion and Education, said the Sikh community, is very concerned about the possible backlash from the Orlando killings. "We are thankful to the White House for sending Cecilia Munoz to the Sikh congregation in Silver Spring in Maryland. As we were thrilled by this kind gesture, our hearts were broken with the terrible news about the merciless killings of so many innocent people in Orlando," Singh said.

- PTI