

Suspect in Atlanta Spa Attacks Is Charged With 8 Counts of Murder

Six of the eight people killed were women of Asian descent, setting off a new wave of outrage and fear.

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ACWORTH, Ga. — A gunman's rampage that killed eight people, including six women of Asian descent, in the Atlanta area this week has set off a new wave of fear and outrage among Asian-Americans, coming in a year of anti-Asian violence across the country.

The suspect who was charged on Wednesday with the killings at three spas told detectives that he had frequented massage parlors in the past and had carried out the attacks as a way to eliminate temptation.

Investigators said they had not ruled out a racial motive, even as the suspect, a 21-year-old white man from the Atlanta suburbs, denied being driven by such bigotry. He told the police that he had a "sexual addiction" and saw the spas as an outlet for something "that he shouldn't be doing," said Capt. Jay Baker of the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office.

"He was attempting to take out that temptation," Captain Baker said. All but one of the victims were women.

Still, around Atlanta and throughout the country, officials and community leaders said it could not be ignored that most of those killed in the rampage had been of Asian descent.

"Racially motivated violence should be called out for exactly what it is and we must stop making excuses and rebranding it as economic anxiety or sexual addiction," Representative Marilyn Strickland, a Democrat of Washington State, said on the floor of Congress on Wednesday. "As a woman who is Black and Korean I am acutely aware of how it feels to be erased or ignored."

Flowers were left on Wednesday in front of Young's Asian Massage, a spa where four people were killed. Nicole Buchanan for The New York Times

In Washington, President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, the first woman and the first Asian-American to hold the office, separately weighed in on the rampage. Mr. Biden noted that the motive for the killings had yet to be determined, but he spoke of “the brutality against Asian-Americans for the last couple months,” which he called “very, very troubling.”

Officials and advocates have noted a rise in crimes against Asian-Americans during the pandemic, with some blaming the words of former President Donald J. Trump, who has repeatedly called the coronavirus, which was first identified in Wuhan, China, the “Chinese virus.”

On Wednesday afternoon, the suspect, Robert Aaron Long, was charged with eight counts of murder in connection with the attacks. He was being held at the Cherokee County jail.

The authorities said the shooting spree began shortly before 5 p.m. on Tuesday at Young's Asian Massage in Acworth, Ga., a culturally diverse community about 30 miles northwest of Atlanta.

Next door to the spa, Martha Enciso and her co-workers at Perfecto Beauty Salon were working to a background of Spanish-language music when they heard what sounded like someone pounding on the walls.

They did not make much of it at the time, she said. “Who could imagine what was happening there?”

Four people were later found fatally shot at Young's Asian Massage. The police identified the victims as Delaina Ashley Yaun, 33, Paul Andre Michels, 54, Xiaojie Tan, 49, and Daoyou Feng, 44.

Elcias R. Hernandez-Ortiz, 30, an immigrant from Guatemala who had been walking past the parlor to a money exchange business next door, was also shot and critically injured. His wife, Flor Gonzalez, said doctors had told her that he had been wounded in his forehead, throat, lungs and stomach.

“He's still alive, he's fighting for his life,” she said on Wednesday. “But the doctors told me that he will have a long recovery after he leaves the hospital.”

Less than an hour after the shooting in Acworth, gunfire continued in a stretch of strip clubs and massage parlors that has held on in a gentrifying neighborhood of northeastern Atlanta.

A body was taken out of Gold Spa on Tuesday night. Brynn Anderson/Associated Press

At 5:47 p.m., the Atlanta Police Department received a 911 call from a woman who, speaking very softly, said that there had been a robbery at Gold Spa, and that a “white guy” had a gun, according to audio recordings of 911 calls released by the police.

The woman said she was hiding and did not know whether anyone had been hurt. Police soon arrived at Gold Spa, a battered beige storefront with a bright neon marquee, to find that three women had been shot.

Ten minutes after that call, another woman dialed 911, saying that she had been told by a friend at Aromatherapy Spa, which sits roughly across the street, that a man had arrived with a gun. “Everybody heard the gunshot and some lady got hurt I think and everybody’s scared and they’re hiding,” the woman said. There, the police found another victim.

By then, the authorities had seen a man climbing into a black Hyundai Tucson in video surveillance footage from Young’s Asian Massage. Cherokee County sheriff’s deputies shared images from the video on social media and within two hours, Mr. Long’s parents had contacted the department and identified the man as their son.

“They’re very distraught,” Sheriff Frank Reynolds said. But, he said, “they were very helpful in this apprehension.”

A Rise in Anti-Asian Attacks

A torrent of hate and violence against people of Asian descent around the United States began last spring, in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic.

- **Background:** Community leaders say the bigotry was fueled by President Donald J. Trump, who frequently used racist language like “Chinese virus” to refer to the coronavirus.
- **Data:** The New York Times, using media reports from across the country to capture a sense of the rising tide of anti-Asian bias, found more than 110 episodes since March 2020 in which there was clear evidence of race-based hate.
- **Underreported Hate Crimes:** The tally may be only a sliver of the violence and

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A little over two hours after the first shooting, Mr. Long’s car was spotted heading south on the interstate in Crisp County, about 150 miles south of Atlanta. Mr. Long would later tell the authorities that he was driving to Florida to commit similar violence against “some type of porn industry,” Captain Baker said. The authorities said he was found with a 9-millimeter handgun.

Matt Kilgo, a lawyer for Big Woods Goods, a gun shop and shooting range in Canton, Ga., said Mr. Long had bought a weapon legally from the shop on the day of the shooting. Mr. Kilgo said that the store complied with all laws and regulations in selling the gun, and that the store had been cooperating with authorities.

Mr. Long grew up in the suburbs and exurbs of Cherokee County, and those who had known him when he was younger said they were struggling to make sense of the accusations against him.

Brett Cottrell, who was the former youth and missions pastor at Crabapple First Baptist Church, described Mr. Long as one of the most committed members of the church’s youth group.

One woman was killed at Aromatherapy Spa. Elijah Novelege/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In high school yearbooks, Mr. Long talked of becoming a leader in the church and also was noted for playing the drums. “It’s definitely an outlet,” he was quoted as saying in one yearbook. “If I’m angry or something I go down to my drum set and start hitting stuff. It just helps.”

In January 2019, Mr. Long’s parents reported him missing, according to police records from the Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office. The couple told the police that their son, then 19, had gone to visit a girlfriend in Chattanooga, Tenn., and then sent them a text message saying he was not coming back and wanted a “fresh start.” An officer told the Longs that their son did not meet the criteria as a missing person.

When a reporter called a phone belonging to Mr. Long’s mother, the woman who answered hung up.

On Wednesday morning, amid the crime scenes in the strip malls of Cherokee County and northeastern Atlanta, people returned to their jobs with a mix of terror and dread.

“We have no choice,” said Ms. Enciso, 46, returning to work at the beauty salon next door to Young’s Asian Massage. “Life can’t slow down,” she said. “We came in fear: Imagine, we are Hispanic, and some people hate us too.”

Far beyond the Atlanta region, Asian-American leaders were bracing after the killings.

“There are a lot of people who are even afraid to leave the house now,” said Max Leung, the founder of a group called the SF Peace Collective, which patrols streets in San Francisco to protect Asian communities from violence. “They’re afraid to go outside.”

On Wednesday afternoon, Sierra Houang, a Georgia Tech student, came with a friend to lay flowers at the two Atlanta massage parlors.

“I don’t usually have to deal with anti-Asian sentiment because I pass as white,” said Ms. Houang, whose father is Taiwanese. “I carry a lot of guilt because my grandparents and my dad bore a lot of that burden. They worked hard so I would never have to be in a place where I’d know that. Still, this feels very personal to me.”

After leaving the flowers at the spas on Piedmont Road, Ms. Houang and her friend said they were headed for the massage parlor in Cherokee County to pay their respects there as well.

Richard Fausset reported from Acworth, Campbell Robertson from Pittsburgh, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs from New York, and Sean Keenan from Atlanta. Reporting was contributed by Edgar Sandoval and Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio from New York; Frances Robles from Key West, Fla.; Ruth Graham from Warner, N.H.; John Eligon from Kansas City, Mo.; Marie Fazio from Jacksonville, Fla.; and Jim Tankersley from Washington.