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British Columbia

B.C. human rights commissioner reminds victims of anti-Muslim hate crimes there is legal help

Ottawa has identified the rise of far right extremism and hate as a major threat to Canada

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B.C. Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender says hate crimes against Muslims in Canada grew 253 per cent between 2012 and 2015, (Harold Dupuis/CBC)

Kasari Govender wants British Columbians to know they are not alone if they are the victim of a hate crime; they also have the law on their side.

The province's human rights commissioner, speaking Thursday on CBC's *The Early Edition*, said anti-Muslim hate has been on the rise in Canada and it is important people know that they have human rights protections and legal recourse through the country's Criminal Code.

Govender's reminder comes in the wake of a fatal vehicle attack on a Muslim family of five in London, Ont., Sunday that killed four and left a young boy orphaned.

Police have described the deadly hit and run as a premeditated hate crime.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has since called it a terrorist attack and reiterated in the House of Commons Tuesday it is not an isolated event.





Yumna Afzaal, 15, left, Madiha Salman, 44, centre left, Talat Afzaal, 74, and Salman Afzaal, 46, right, were out for an evening walk when they were run over by a man who police say was motivated by anti-Muslim hate. (Submitted by Afzaal family)

- [Muslim family killed in 'premeditated' hit and run in London, Ont., driver charged with murder, police say](#)

The Quebec City mosque massacre, the September murder of a man at a Rexdale, Ont., mosque and multiple less violent — but still alarming — episodes like the recent [harassment of Black Muslim women in Edmonton](#) reveal a troubling streak of Islamophobia in Canada, Trudeau said.

"We know that hate crimes against Muslims in Canada grew 253 per cent between 2012 and 2015, so definitely on the rise," said Govender.

Accessing legal help

In B.C., the Islamophobia Legal Assistance Hotline can help Muslims who have been, or fear they could be, the subject of discrimination and attacks. It's a service

that connects people with free and confidential legal advice.

Lawyer Hasan Alam, the hotline's community liaison, says it can be a very helpful service for people who are not familiar with Canada's legal system or if English is not their first language. Alam said hotline staff can also connect people with professional counsellors.

The Islamophobia Legal Assistance Hotline can be reached at 604-343-3828.



A woman wearing a face mask reacts near flowers laid at the fatal crime scene in London, Ont., where a man driving a pickup truck jumped the curb and ran over a Muslim family in what police say was a deliberately targeted anti-Islamic hate crime. (Carlos Osorio/Reuters)

The B.C. Human Rights Clinic also operates a telephone info line which provides general information about the B.C. Human Rights Code. The info line can be reached toll free at 1-855-685-6222.

The clinic, operated by the Community Legal Assistance Society, offers free virtual appointments with legal experts.

Far right extremism rising

The federal government has identified far right extremism and hate as a major threat to the country.

In January, a research [report by the Department of National Defence](#) said far right extremism is on the rise in Canada and is likely to continue to increase — especially under pandemic circumstances.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau lays flowers at a vigil outside the London Muslim Mosque for the victims of the deadly vehicle attack on five members of the Canadian Muslim community in London, Ont., on Tuesday, June 8, 2021. (Nathan Denette/The Canadian Press)

Govender said her office is working to let people who have been, or may be, targeted by extremists know what their legal options are.

"There are mechanisms for redress under the criminal law, which I think a lot of people are aware of ... what many folks aren't aware of is that the human rights system also allows for redress against hate in certain circumstances, and that can lower the bar in terms of that standard of proof that's required," said Govender.

- [Here's what Ottawa has said, and done, about Islamophobia and attacks on Muslim Canadians](#)

Unchecked online hate

University of Northern British Columbia student Nadia Mansour, 18, is a hijab-wearing Muslim living in Prince George who told CBC she is afraid of being violently attacked after what happened in Ontario.

She said unchecked hate speech online enables vitriol, sparks violence and needs to be cracked down on harder by Canadian officials.

"Online is a huge platform where I feel like a lot of conversations are triggered or

talked about where people feel safer to have these terrible conversations," said Mansour.

WATCH | Advocate calls for stronger regulations against online hate in Canada:



Federal government slow to act on online hate

12 months ago | 1:57

The government signed an international pledge to tackle hate online, and promised action years ago. But legislation has languished, and with a summer break coming and a possible election in the air, it may never get to a vote.

Online, said Govender, is where Canadian laws and human rights legislation could better serve citizens.

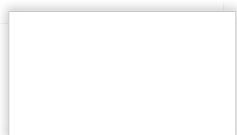
She said Canada's Criminal Code does equate online hate speech with in-person

hate speech but the burden of proof is high and there are defences built in that can favour the perpetrator, such as things that were said on the basis of genuine religious belief.

- [Canadians among most active in online right-wing extremism, research finds](#)

Human rights law right in Canada, according to Govender, doesn't currently have explicit protections against online speech and she says she'd like to see that change.

"The substance of the speech, doesn't matter whether it happens on Facebook, on a Facebook post, or in- person or on a poster, it should be covered by human rights law," said the commissioner.



9:02

B.C. Human Rights Commissioner reacts to deadly Ontario attack.

Kasari Govender speaks with host Stephen Quinn about accessing legal resources to push back against anti-Muslim hate in Canada.

With files from The Early Edition, Bridgette Watson

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