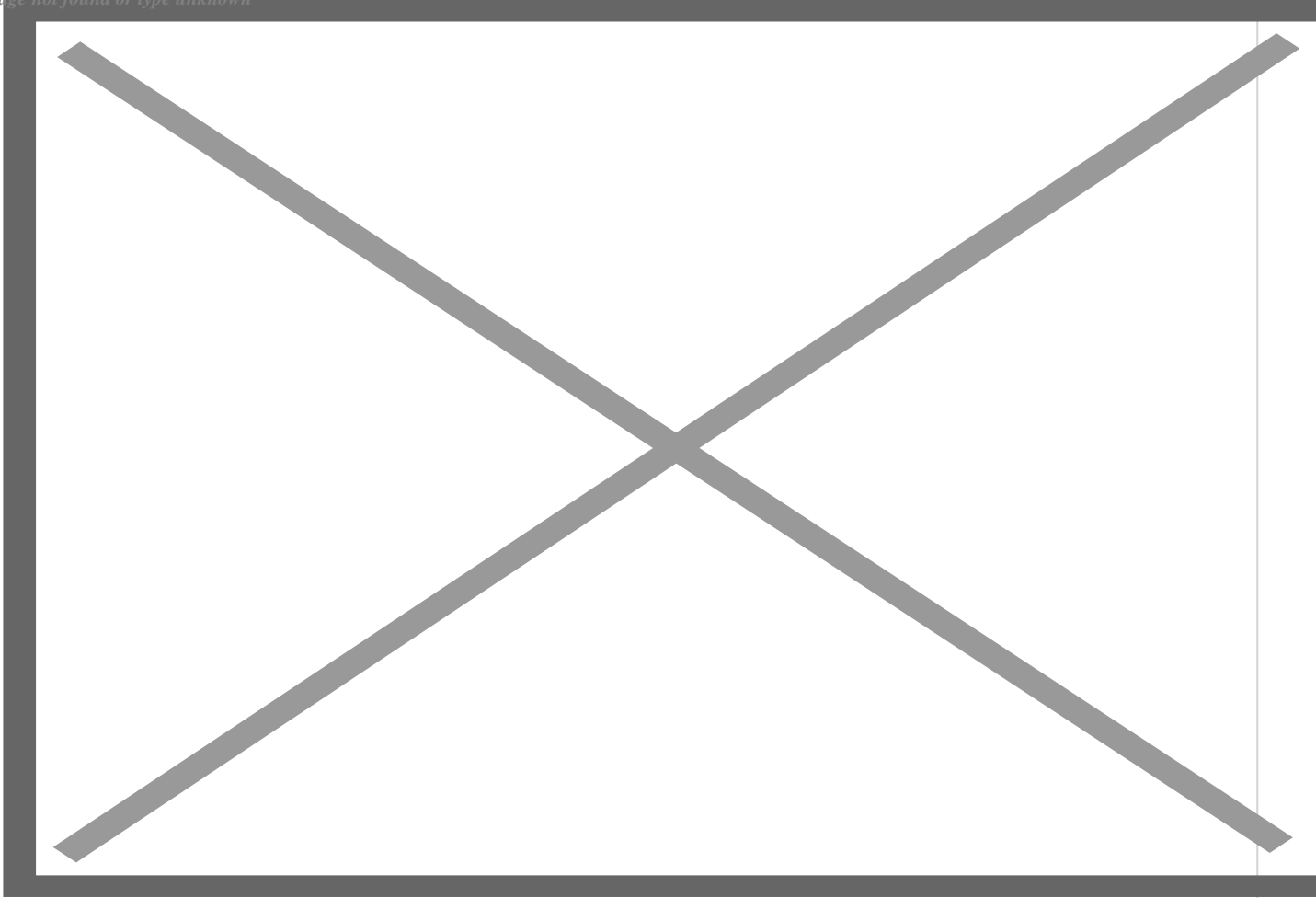


Six Asian women killed in U.S. shootings

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Officials with the Fulton County Medical Examiner's office remove a body from the Gold Spa massage parlor after a shooting in Atlanta. (Photo: Erik S. Lesser/EPA)

Atlanta, March 17 (RHC)-- At least eight people, most of them Asian women, were killed in shootings at three different spas in the U.S. state of Georgia on Tuesday, with a 21-year-old white man in custody on suspicion of staging all three attacks, police said.

The shootings came with many Asian Americans already on edge following a recent spike in hate crimes against the community and triggered immediate fears that Asian-run businesses may have been

deliberately singled out.

The Atlanta police department separately confirmed that four women were found dead at two business establishments in northeast Atlanta, identified as the Gold Massage Spa and Aroma Therapy spa. Police told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that all four Atlanta victims were Asian women.

Baker did not say if investigators suspect that Asian Americans were specifically targeted. “Nothing’s going to be ruled out,” he said. “We’re conducting a homicide, a multiple homicide investigation. So wherever the evidence leads us, that’s where the investigators will go.”

Authorities have identified Robert Aaron Long as a suspect in all three shootings. Based on the pattern of surveillance video from the shooting scenes, Atlanta police spokesman Sergeant John Chafee told the AFP news agency: “It is extremely likely our suspect is the same as Cherokee County’s, who is in custody.”

“We are working closely with them to confirm with certainty our cases are related,” he added.

Long was taken into custody after a “brief pursuit” about 240 kilometres (150 miles) from Atlanta, according to a statement by the Georgia Department of Safety on Facebook. Describing the scene in northeast Atlanta, the city police department said: “Upon arrival, officers located three females deceased inside the location from apparent gunshot wounds.”

While on the scene, officers were advised of shots fired across the street, where they found a fourth female victim. The Federal Bureau of Investigation was assisting in the investigation, a spokesman told AFP.

South Korea’s Foreign Ministry said in statement that its diplomats in Atlanta have confirmed from police that four of the victims who died were women of Korean descent. The shootings come as reports of attacks against Asian-Americans, primarily elders, have spiked in recent months – heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, activists believe, by talk of the “Chinese virus” by former President Donald Trump and others.

The New York police department’s counterterrorism bureau said it was “monitoring the shooting of Asian Americans in Georgia” and deploying officers “to our great Asian communities across the city out of an abundance of caution,” though it added there was no known link to the city.

While racial motivation can be hard to establish, a study by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at CSU San Bernardino found that reported anti-Asian hate crimes nearly tripled from 49 to 122 cases last year across 16 big US cities including New York and Los Angeles – even as overall hate crime fell seven percent.

Georgia is home to nearly 500,000 Asian residents, or just over four percent of its population, according to the Asian American Advocacy Fund.

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