

British Columbia

Sikh protesters in Vancouver decry gurdwara president shooting death as foreign interference

Hardeep Singh Nijjar was gunned down in his vehicle around 8:30 p.m. on June 18

Chuck Chiang · The Canadian Press · Posted: Jun 24, 2023 10:44 PM EDT | Last Updated: June 24, 2023



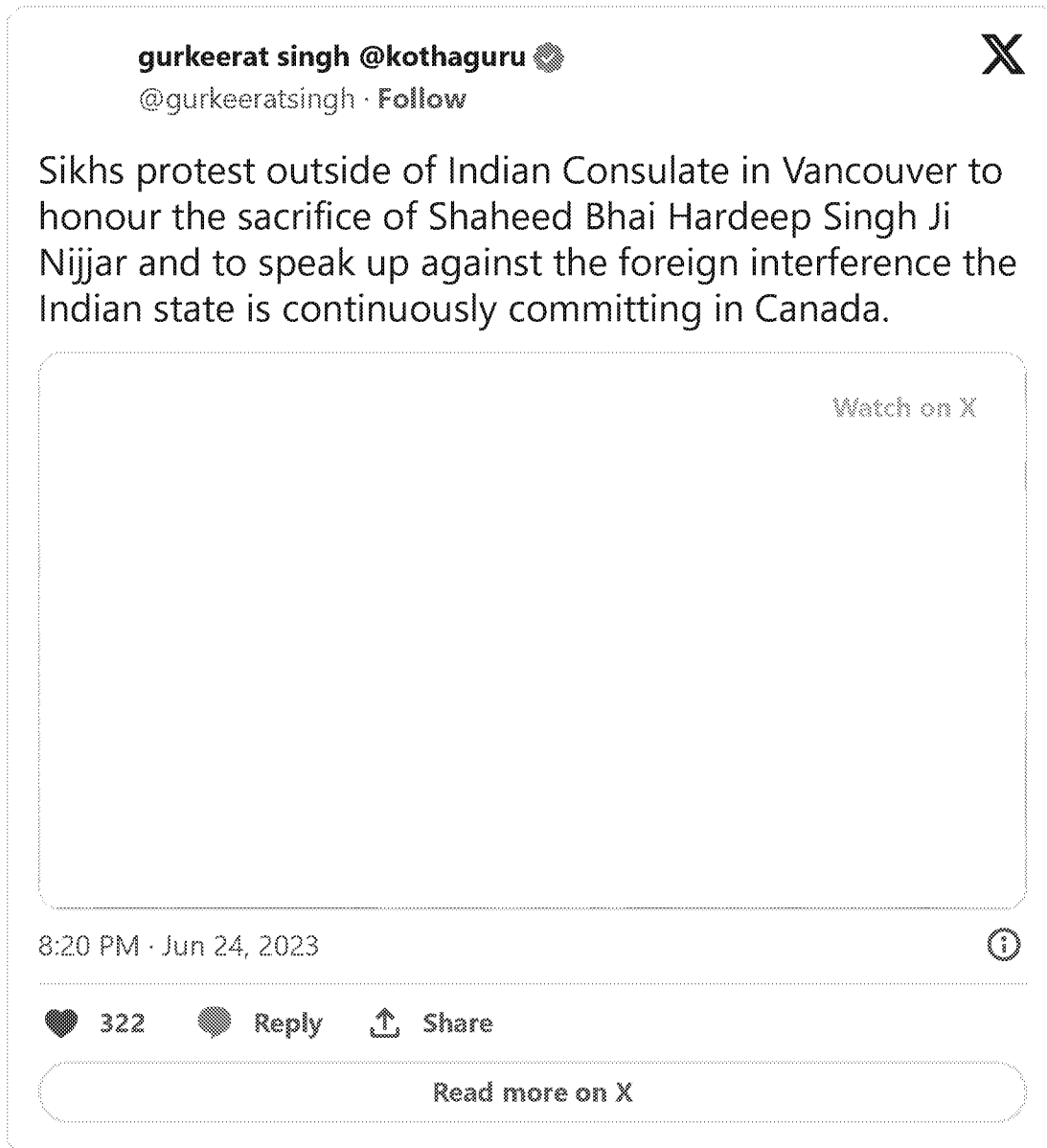
Protesters chant outside of the Consulate General of India Office during a protest in Vancouver, on Saturday, June 24. A member of the Sikh community who attended the protest said gurdwara members believe Nijjar's death was a result of foreign interference. (Ethan Cairns/The Canadian Press)

A volunteer at the Metro Vancouver Sikh gurdwara whose president was gunned down a week ago said Hardeep Singh Nijjar knew his life may have been in danger.

Gurkeerat Singh said Nijjar gave a speech at the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey, B.C. — southeast of Vancouver — on the day of his death just hours before the shooting in the building's parking lot that claimed his life, noting he had been warned by Canadian intelligence officials.

Singh, who attended a protest Saturday in front of Vancouver's Indian consulate along with more than 200 others from Canada's Sikh community, said gurdwara members firmly believe Nijjar's death was a result of foreign interference.

"When they are informing our leaders that their lives may be in danger, we have all the right to believe that it could be foreign interference involved in this," Singh said.



Nijjar was gunned down in his vehicle while leaving the gurdwara parking lot at around 8:30 p.m. on June 18, and homicide investigators said they are looking for two "heavy-set" suspects seen leaving the scene, likely to a getaway car parked a few blocks away.

While police have acknowledged that there is fear and speculation stemming from the attack, investigators say they have not linked the shooting to foreign interference and there are no reasons to believe the Sikh community in Canada is at risk.

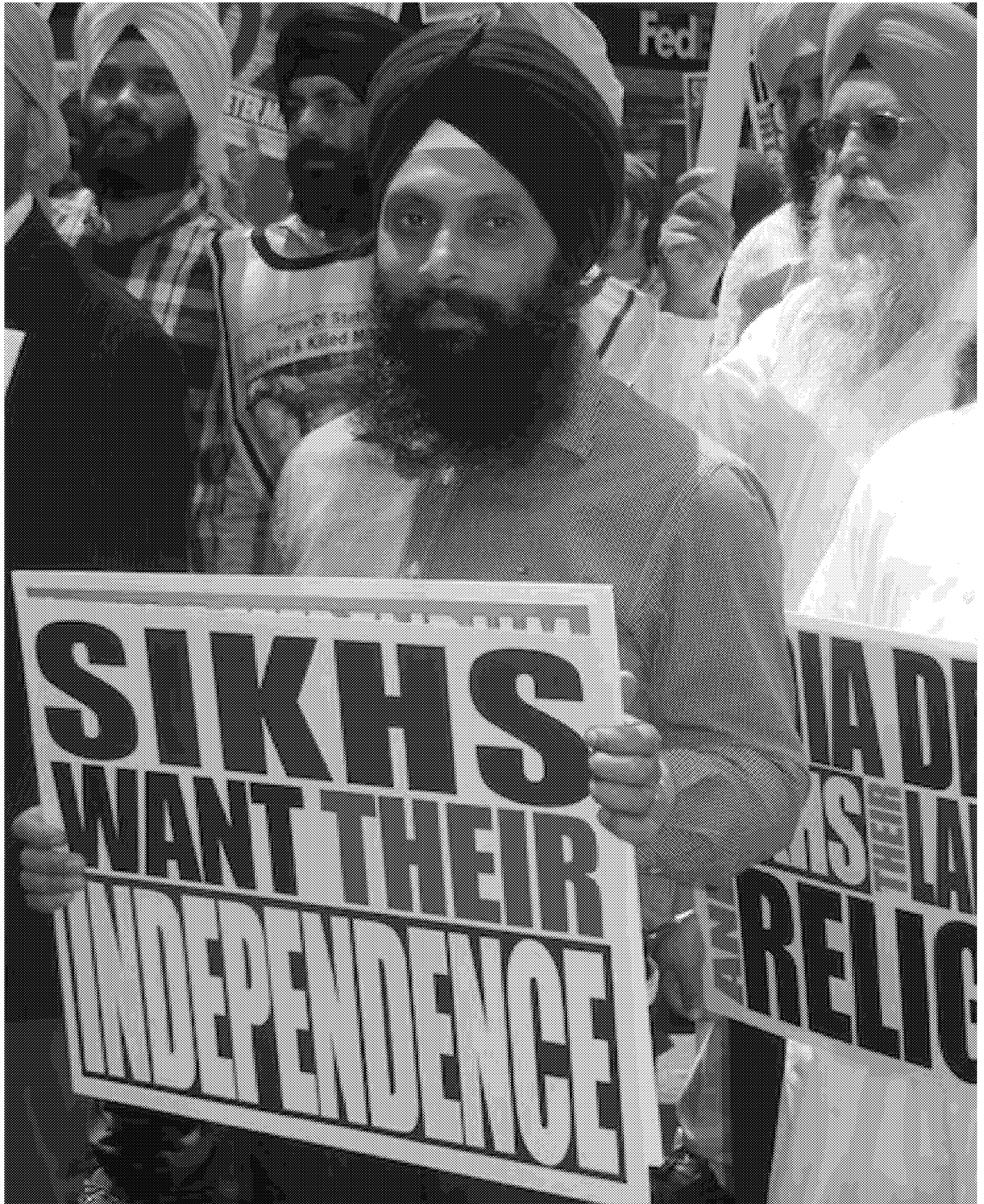
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Protesters, however, say they are convinced the killing was linked to Nijjar's active role in advocating for an independent state for India's Sikh minority.

Khalistan would include India's north-western state of Punjab, where Sikhs make up the majority.

Nijjar was organizing an unofficial referendum in Hindu-majority India for an independent Sikh state at the time of this death.



Gurdwara members fear the shooting death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, who was killed on June 18, 2023, was a result of foreign interference. (Sikhs for Justice)

The Indian government had offered a reward of one million rupees, or about \$16,000, last July for information that could lead to Nijjar's arrest or apprehension, and the country's counterterrorism body referred to him as a "fugitive terrorist" who led a conspiracy to murder a Hindu priest.

Protesters, however, described Nijjar as "peaceful," "humble" and "loved in the community" for his outreach efforts.

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Those included offering free meals to people in need and travelling to Kamloops in 2021 to offer support to First Nations groups after the discovery of suspected unmarked graves at a the former Kamloops Indian Residential School site.

"He was a loving man, a hard-working man, a family man," Singh said. "He worked as a plumber, so he's well respected in the community, and he was someone that always the community looked up to."



A picture of Hardeep Singh Nijjar is seen at a protest in Vancouver, on Saturday, June 24 outside of the Consulate General of India Office following the recent shooting that killed Nijjar. (Ethan Cairns/The Canadian Press)

Protesters on Saturday mostly wore orange turbans and carried large yellow flags displaying the word "Khalistan," chanting loudly as many stepped on an Indian flag they brought to the scene.

The crowd consisted of Sikh community members covering the full gamut of demographics from young children to the elderly, and some said they travelled from cities such as Edmonton, Toronto and Montreal.

"I am overwhelmed by the response of the Sikh community," said Jatinder Singh Grewal, a director with Sikhs for Justice, a group that helped organize the protest.

"The Sikhs all around the world, not only from B.C. but from all over the world have outpoured their support for Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

"People who can come out, have come out in support of this."



A bystander walks by as protesters hold a flag representing Khalistan outside of the Consulate General of India Office in Vancouver on June 24. Protesters say they are convinced the killing was linked to Nijjar's active role in advocating for an independent state for India's Sikh minority. (Ethan Cairns/The Canadian Press)

Singh said he hopes the protest further opens Canadians' eyes to not only Nijjar's death, but also the possibility of foreign interference on home soil.

"Canada is someone who prides itself in human rights and leading in freedom of expression, freedom of speech and freedom overall," he said.

"So if Canada is someone who advocates for this ... it's definitely a Canadian issue, and Canadians should be concerned about this."

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