

## Fire, vandalism rock Buddhist temple in Little Tokyo



*A glass window was destroyed, two wooden lantern stands burned and two metallic lanterns vandalized at Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple in L.A.'s Little Tokyo. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)*

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Ash and charred wood still lined the 10-step concrete staircase ascending toward the entrance of [Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple](#) in Little Tokyo on Friday afternoon, the remnants of vandalism and a fire from the evening before.

A 12-foot-high glass window was destroyed by a lime-sized rock; two 6-foot wooden lantern stands were burned, causing the electrical lamps above them to melt and fray; and two 30-pound metallic lanterns were ripped off their concrete bases.

The damage led to feelings of shock and despair among the few priests and staff at the temple, which has been closed to in-person services since March because of COVID-19 precautions.

“Your first feelings are those of disappointment and sadness to see what happened,” said the Rev. Noriaki Ito, 72, a bishop and the temple’s head priest. “I don’t know the motives, but it looks like we were targeted. The only relief I find is that no one was hurt.”

The fire and vandalism occurred as hate crimes against Asian Americans are increasing, with recent cases spanning from [Sacramento](#) to [Rosemead](#) under investigation. The advocacy and tracking group [Stop AAPI Hate](#) noted “[245 incidents of hate in Los Angeles County](#)” against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders between March 20 and Oct. 28, with Chinese Americans the largest target (35%).

The Los Angeles Fire Department responded to what was first described as a rubbish fire about 7 p.m. Thursday. Arson investigators have since been to the scene, said LAFD spokeswoman Margaret Stewart, declining to comment further on an active investigation.

Los Angeles Police Department Capt. Stacy Spell cautioned it was too early to label Thursday’s vandalism a hate crime because the investigation is in the “preliminary stages.”

Ito turned over surveillance video to investigators; in it, he said, an unidentified man is shown jumping the security fences at the 1 1/2-acre compound, which includes a parking lot, chapel and preschool.

No security guard on was duty. And though the temple has an alarm system, it was turned off that night.

“That is something we will have to change,” Ito said. “That can’t happen.”

Ito said the vandal first grabbed the metal lanterns, donated at the temple’s opening in 1976, at the bottom of the stairs and pulled them off their concrete bases. He then climbed to the top of the stairs, pulled out what Ito believes was a cigarette lighter, and ignited each wooden lantern stand.

The man never attempted to enter the temple. He left the property only to turn around behind the security gate and chuck a rock about 20 feet that shattered the glass window near the center of the entrance. Temple officials have since replaced the glass with plywood.



*A Los Angeles Police Department captain cautioned it was too early to label Thursday's vandalism at the temple a hate crime because the investigation is in the "preliminary stages." (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)*

Temple staff were on a Zoom meeting as the vandalism occurred, although one priest — the Rev. Masa Fujii — heard the commotion and extinguished the fires with an extinguisher.

"I'm thankful he was working in the back office and was able to run and put out the fire, otherwise the damage could have been worse," said David Ikeda, a former temple board president who was on the Zoom call.

Ikeda and Ito said Thursday's vandalism is part of a troubling pattern of security breaches at the sanctuary during the last two weeks.

They said that on Feb. 18, a couple trespassed onto the property and, when told to leave by a security guard, assaulted the man, who has since quit.

On Tuesday, another unidentified person snuck onto the property as a Costco truck was making a delivery and stole an unattended iPhone from a temple gardener.

"This is going to lead to changes where we're going to have 24-hour security, at least during the weekdays," said Ito, who has been with the temple since its founding. "We've been here 45 years and this has never happened."