

School leaders say HBCUs are undeterred after a series of bomb threats

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A week after a series of bomb threats against historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) across the U.S., public officials and university presidents are speaking out against what they've characterized as a racist attack against the schools and their students.

"They are disappointed. They are traumatized," Alcorn State University President Felecia Nave said of the school's students and staff in the wake of the bomb threats. "[But] they're resilient. And they are resolved to continue to move forward and to make it known that we won't be threatened, we won't be scared away."

Michelle Asha Cooper, deputy assistant secretary for higher education programs at the U.S. Department of Education, said she believed the threats were designed to menace the colleges.

"While the interruption to learning is unacceptable, what is worse is that these acts were meant to intimidate and to invoke fear," Cooper said.

"The timing of these threats to coincide with the first day of Black History Month was a likely attempt to exploit tensions among some factions of our society," she added.

Nave and Cooper made the comments during a virtual roundtable held Tuesday by the nonprofit Southern Poverty Law Center, which estimated that nearly 20 HBCUs had been the subject of bomb threats on Jan. 31 and Feb. 1.

Among those targeted were Howard University in Washington, D.C., Morgan State University in Baltimore, Edward Waters University in Jacksonville, Fla., Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge, La., as well as Spelman College in Atlanta, which received another threat on Tuesday. No bombs were found.

The FBI is investigating the bomb threats as violent extremism and hate crimes

The FBI has identified six "tech savvy" juveniles as persons of interest in its investigation into the bomb threats against HBCUs earlier this month, according to NBC News.

One of the callers who phoned in a threat against Bethune-Cookman University claimed to be affiliated with the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division, the Associated Press reported.

"This investigation is of the highest priority for the Bureau and involves more than 20 FBI field offices across the country," the FBI said last week about its investigation into bomb threats at HBCUs and houses of worship. "These threats are being investigated as racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism and hate crimes."

Cooper said the Education Department would continue to partner with the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security, which have been leading the investigations into the bomb threats, to potentially provide colleges with additional training and help them update their emergency plans to include physical threats such as bomb scares.

The college presidents noted that the bomb threats came at a politically tense time in the country, as some conservative states are moving to ban "critical race theory" in schools and outlaw books about the history of racism in the U.S.

Walter Kimbrough, president of Dillard University in New Orleans, likened the current threats of violence to those activists faced during the civil rights Movement.

"We try to make civil rights a finite period of time. And now that we have some new challenges, we're sort of trying to figure out, hey, what do we do with this," he said.

"We have to make a sacrifice sometimes. And we have to show that we are not afraid," Kimbrough added. "The idea is to disrupt us. And it's not to say that there couldn't be a tangible threat at some point down the road. But we can't just stop doing everything."