

Bomb threats targeting US Black colleges investigated as hate crimes

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The FBI has said a series of hoax bomb threats targeting US historically Black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, are being investigated as racially motivated hate crimes.

Howard University, one of the jewels in the crown of HBCUs, was the target of bomb threats for a second day.

More than a dozen HBCUs reported bomb threats on Tuesday, the first day of Black history month.

On Monday, six HBCUs received similar threats, forcing them to cancel classes for thousands of students.

A number of HBCUs faced simultaneous threats from anonymous callers earlier in January.

“These threats are being investigated as racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism and hate crimes,” the FBI said in a statement on Wednesday.

“Although no explosive devices have been found at any of the locations, the FBI takes all threats with the utmost seriousness, and we are committed to thoroughly and aggressively investigating these threats.”

NBC reported that six “tech savvy” juveniles had been identified as persons of interest. The network said the group were “using sophisticated methods to try to disguise the source of the threats, which appear to have a racist motivation”.

CNN reported that at least 14 HBCUs received bomb threats on Tuesday, including Coppin State University, Mississippi Valley State University, Fort Valley State University and Howard University, in Washington DC and the alma mater of the vice-president, Kamala Harris.

According to school officials, threats were sent on Monday to Howard; Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida; Southern University and A&M in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Albany State University in Albany, Georgia; Bowie State University in Bowie, Maryland; and Delaware State University in Dover.

On Tuesday, Miguel Cardona, US secretary of education, said: “Our Historically Black Colleges and Universities have again been targets of disturbing threats. My team will continue to work with students, faculty, and alumni to make sure HBCUs continue to be a safe place for students to learn. Threats of violence will not be tolerated, period.”

Earlier in January, at least eight HBCUs reported bomb threats. All reported “all-clears” the same day, the Washington Post reported. It was unclear if the threats on Monday and Tuesday were connected to the earlier threats.

In a statement, Damon Hewitt, president and executive director of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, called the bomb threats “a fresh reminder of the ongoing threats to Black life and opportunity, and the continued presence of racist hate ... designed to undermine the mission of HBCUs and to strike at the heart of the sense of pride they instill in the Black community”.

Hewitt also tied the threats to political controversies over the place of race in US education, particularly the teaching of history and in college admissions, and attacks on voting rights.

“These forces,” he said, “are all connected to the purpose of racism and white supremacy, to degrade, humiliate, and intimidate Black people at every possible turn, to the point where no place and no institution is safe”.