

International

Florida suspect charged over 13 mail bombs to Trump opponents

Sayoc, 56, a registered Republican with criminal history

NEW YORK: A Florida fan of Donald Trump was arrested and charged Friday with mailing 13 bombs to opponents of the US president in a brazen, week-long spree that inflamed the country ahead of key elections. Cesar Sayoc, 56, a registered Republican with a criminal history and reported past as a stripper, was born in New York and lived in a van covered in pro-Trump and anti-liberal stickers. He was arrested outside a Florida mall.

The van was impounded and Sayoc charged with five federal crimes, including mailing of explosives and threats against former presidents, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced. If put on trial and convicted, he faces up to 48 years in prison in what politicians on both sides of the aisle have condemned as domestic terrorism. "We do believe that we've caught the right guy but... there's a lot of work still to be done, which means there are still plenty of unanswered questions," FBI director Christopher Wray told a news conference.

The 13 bombs were sent through the mail, many of them through a US Postal Service processing center in Florida, and Sayoc was tracked down based on fingerprint and possible DNA evidence, agents said. The Republican president congratulated law enforcement for what he called a "fantastic job." Speaking before his supporters at a North Carolina campaign rally later Friday, Trump called the attempted attacks "terrorist actions" that must be punished "to the fullest extent of the law." "Political violence must never be allowed in America and I will do everything in my power to stop it."

In southern Florida, FBI agents and police swarmed the strip mall in Plantation, where an AFP photographer saw a van covered in blue tarpaulin loaded onto a truck by authorities and driven away. Sayoc is accused of mailing explosives to 11 prominent Democrats or liberal critics of the president, including former president Barack Obama and Trump's opponent in the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton. The other targets were ex-vice president Joe Biden, Hollywood star Robert De Niro, billionaire donor George Soros, former CIA director John Brennan, former intelligence chief James Clapper, former attorney general Eric Holder, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, and

Senators Cory Booker and Kamala Harris.

Trump denies blame

Waters and Biden were each sent two packages. All the targets are loathed by Trump supporters for their public opposition to the US president. The president acknowledged the suspect's political allegiance, but denied any



Sayoc charged with five federal crimes

responsibility that his incendiary rhetoric could have played a role in motivating the spree. "I heard he was a person that preferred me over others," he told reporters. "There is no blame," he insisted, despite being hounded by political opponents for his response to the crisis in which he lashed out at the media. "The media has been unbelievably unfair to Republicans, conservatives, and certainly to me," he said Friday. "But with all of that being said, we're winning. So I like that."

Asked about the role that rhetoric could have played, the FBI demurred. "It's too early at this stage for us to be discussing motivation in this particular case," Wray told reporters in Washington. A lawyer for the suspect's family, Ron Lowy, told CNN that Sayoc prior "had no interest in politics," and that he was more into "bodybuilding, nightclub events." US media reported Sayoc had once danced as a male stripper, and The New York Daily News quoted an event promoter as saying the suspect would dance at strip clubs and ran a show called "Girls Night Out."



BISCAYNE COVE: Police guard the entrance to the Clipper Apartment Building at Biscayne Cove, Florida. The building reportedly has been identified as the home of the mother of Cesar Sayoc's, who was arrested in connection with the explosive device mailings. — AFP

"It's my opinion that he was attracted to the Trump formula of reaching out," lawyer Lowy said. "Trump reaching out to these types of outsiders, people who don't fit in, people who are angry at America, telling them that they have a place at the table, telling them that it's OK to get angry." "I believe that that was a motivating factor. Do I blame the president solely? No. This is a sick individual." Each of the homemade bombs included six inches of PVC pipe, a small clock, a battery, wiring and energetic material, defined by Wray as potentially explosive. The first package was intercepted Monday at Soros's Bedford, New York

home. The most recent ones on Friday in California, Florida and New York. The Clapper and Brennan packages were marked care of CNN, a television network often critical of the administration and long provoking Trump's ire. Trump has come under fire for his response to the spree, which politicians on all sides have branded domestic terrorism, stretching from New York, Maryland, Florida, Delaware and Los Angeles. On Friday, shortly before news of the arrest broke, he complained that the packages were slowing momentum for his Republican Party ahead of the November 6 elections, remarks that enraged his opponents. — AFP

US mail bombing suspect an ardent Trump supporter

PLANTATION: Cesar Altieri Sayoc, the Florida man accused of sending pipe bombs to critics of Donald Trump, had plastered his social media accounts and the van where he was living with signs of his devotion to the Republican president and his hatred for Democrats. Sayoc, 56, of Aventura, Florida, was arrested on Friday for allegedly mailing at least 13 explosive devices to leading Democratic figures, former high-ranking officials and others, FBI Director Christopher Wray said.

Sayoc, a registered Republican with a criminal history and reported past as a stripper, currently faces up to 48 years in prison, although further charges are expected to be filed against him for the mail-bombing campaign, which heightened political tensions and put the country on edge. Television footage of Sayoc in custody showed a muscular man in a sleeveless black shirt with close-cropped black hair.

Sayoc has been arrested several times previously, including in Miami-Dade County in 2002 for making a bomb threat against a power company, according to court records available online. He was sentenced to a year on probation. He has also been arrested for theft and domestic violence. Sayoc, who sometimes goes by the name Cesar Altieri, also has a history of financial problems and filed for bankruptcy in 2012, according to county records. Sayoc's political leanings are on full display on his Facebook page - which CNN reported has been removed by the social network - as well as his now-suspended Twitter accounts and his impounded white van, which was covered with pro-Trump decals and anti-Democrat stickers.

A picture on Sayoc's Facebook page shows him wearing a red Trump "Make America Great Again" hat and photos have since surfaced of him attending Trump rallies in Florida. One of the windows of his van, which was seized by the FBI, features pictures of former president Barack Obama and 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton with red bulls-eyes on their faces. There's also a "CNN Sucks" sticker with a target over the face of one of the network's frequent commentators, Van Jones. Obama, Clinton and CNN were intended recipients of the pipe bombs sent through the mail with a return address in Florida. Debra Gureghian, the general manager of a pizza restaurant in Fort Lauderdale where Sayoc worked as a delivery truck driver for several months, described him to The Washington Post as "crazed." "That's the best word for him," Gureghian said. "There was something really off with him." "He was very angry and angry at the world, at blacks, Jews, gays," she said. "He never said he would kill them or murder them or bomb them he just said 'If I had complete autonomy the gays, the black and Jews would not survive,'" she said. "He was very, very strange."

Sayoc appears to have had at least two Twitter accounts - @hardrock2016 and @hardrockintlent - where he posted as Cesar Altieri and "Julius Cesar Milan." Political commentator Rochelle Ritchie said she reported a threat made by Sayoc's @hardrock2016 account on October 11, but was told by Twitter that it did not violate the site's rules. Twitter subsequently apologized, saying it made a "mistake," and both of Sayoc's accounts have now been suspended. The last post on Sayoc's @hardrock2016 account dates from Wednesday. It is a retweet of a composite image claiming that Andrew Gillum, the Democratic candidate for governor of Florida, "admitted" taking money from billionaire George Soros. — AFP

Syria parents spurn Kurd schools over university fears

QAMISHLI: After carefully packing her schoolbag, seven-year-old Rasha scrambles into the van that shuttles her daily from her home in a Kurdish-held neighborhood of Syria's Qamishli to school in the government-held enclave. Many parents in northeastern Syria, most of which is controlled by Kurdish authorities, are opting to enrol their children in overcrowded state-run schools despite the complex commute.

The defections reflect the broader fissures in the northeast between those supporting formal state institutions and those defending parallel bodies developed by the Kurds. Parents say they prefer their children to study the government curriculum than enrol in the independent system rolled out in recent years by Kurdish authorities. Rasha is one of those pupils. "It's a huge responsibility and an added expense," says her father, a retired school teacher, of the longer daily journey across the divided city. She used to attend class closer to home, but since Kurdish authorities introduced their own curriculum, Rasha transferred to a school in a government-held district of Qamishli.

With many parents making similar decisions, government-operated schools have introduced two shifts per day to accommodate the influx. "Many of the recreational activities like music, drawing and recess were cancelled because of the huge number of pupils," says Rasha's father. "The two sides should reach a solution and not leave our children to this uncertain future." Kurds hold most of Syria's northeast, including territory they captured from the Islamic State group as well as areas from which government forces withdrew early in the seven-year war. Over the years, they have painstakingly developed their own autonomous administration to run public services and the police.

In 2016, Kurdish authorities began introducing a new curriculum in areas under their control, offering schooling in Kurdish and other minority languages, and teaching Kurdish history. They cracked down on schools that resis-



QAMISHLI, Syria: Syrian students walk near a Syrian-government-controlled security zone on their way to attend classes at regime-run schools in the centre of the northeastern Syrian-Kurdish city of Qamishli. — AFP

ted the new syllabus, briefly closing more than a dozen this year that stuck to the state one. So far, the Kurdish curriculum has been rolled out for some 210,000 pupils in around 2,200 schools, education commission official Samira Haj Ali told AFP. But since those schools are not state-accredited, their diplomas are recognized only at the Kurdish-run Rojava University and Kobane University, founded two years ago.

That, for parents and students, is the sticking point. "We're not against learning in Kurdish, we want it for our kids," says Ezzedine Amin, a 39-year-old taxi driver in Qamishli whose children attend government schools. "But the diplomas offered by the autonomous administration aren't recognized elsewhere. If my kids graduate with that degree, where could they go?" As he speaks, class finishes. Girls dressed in shades of pink and boys in blue stream

into the car park to head home. Fatima Khalil Asaad, a 45-year-old teacher at the government-run Saleh Abdi school, says classrooms are overcrowded.

"There are no more desks for students to sit at," says Asaad, her hair wrapped in a bright pink headscarf.

"Pupils come from other towns, like Amuda, Derbasiyeh, and Ras al-Ain, because the state curriculum is only taught in Qamishli and Hasakeh," says Asaad. Both cities have enclaves still held by government troops and allied militia where the state institutions run from Damascus continue to function. The school run from surrounding towns can be as much as 115 kilometers in each direction. Out of some 2,500 schools across the northeast, slightly more than 400 are still teaching the state curriculum, according to 2017 figures from the government-run education directorate. — AFP

Moms hit the trail to preach US gun control

STERLING: With a stack of pamphlets under her arm, Dawnee Giammittorio - who has been a gun control activist since her sister-in-law was shot dead - goes door-to-door in northern Virginia, hoping to help flip control of Congress back to the Democrats. Giammittorio is canvassing in a state that is traditionally conservative but gradually turning to purple, and even blue, as urbanization brings a more diverse population, especially in the areas outside Washington. "If we want the Congress to do something, we are going to have to change the people," Giammittorio said in the runup to the November 6 midterm elections.

'Ineffective gun laws'

In this part of Virginia, gun issues are particularly sensitive, as America's powerful gun rights lobby, the National Rifle Association, is based here. Giammittorio belongs to Moms Demand Action, which gathers each weekend to campaign in pairs, meeting voters to discuss their work for candidates that support tougher gun controls. The right to bear arms is enshrined in the Second Amendment of the

US Constitution, but the issue of gun violence is a constant political football in America. Mass shootings - sadly commonplace in the US - are often followed by calls for political action, which then fade into the background. And the cycle then repeats.

Every day in America, firearms kill more than 90 people. Two-thirds of those are suicides. Like thousands of other moms, who wear red shirts for their cause, the 56-year-old Giammittorio is hoping for change at the ballot box. She is campaigning for Jennifer Wexton, a Democrat running for a seat in the House of Representatives against Republican incumbent Barbara Comstock, who has an "A" rating from the NRA for her voting record. "Jennifer Wexton would definitely help change the balance in the House," said Giammittorio, who is unabashed about her work for Moms Demand Action, which is backing 3,000 "gun sense candidates" on the federal, state and local levels.

Millions of dollars

Giammittorio, who lives closer to Washington in Alexandria, got up on a day off to canvass in Sterling, located in Loudoun County, the scene of the Wexton-Comstock race. Wexton wants to ban assault-style weapons and bolster background checks for gun buyers, specifically to look at their criminal record and mental health history. The contest is a high-profile one, and money is being poured into both campaigns. Comstock has been dubbed



STERLING: Dawnee Giammittorio, 56, and Karen Vaught, 52, who both belong to "Moms Demand Action" prepare to canvass for the Jennifer Wexton, a Democrat running for a seat in the House of Representatives, in Sterling, Virginia. — AFP

"Trumpstock" in some ads, and is also the target of a spot featuring Gabby Giffords, the former congresswoman who was nearly killed in a shooting attack in 2011.

"Shooting after shooting, Barbara Comstock has failed. She's taken thousands from the NRA. We must do better," Giffords said in the ad, which is running on local television networks. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the NRA has spent \$140,000 on Comstock's cam-

paigns since she was elected to Congress in 2014. Wexton is meanwhile backed by Everytown for Gun Safety, an organization with ties to Moms Demand Action and which is largely financed by billionaire former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg. Everytown plans to spend \$20 million nationwide before Election Day on candidates in key districts who favor gun curbs. The NRA did not respond to a request for comment. — AFP