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Mail bomb suspect researched political targets for months, feds say in new filing

By Jay Weaver, Miami Herald 1 day ago



© MATIAS J. OCNER/Miami Herald/TNS Attorney Daniel Aaronson, center, talks to the media after attending a hearing for his client, Cesar Sayoc, at the Federal District Court for the Southern District of Florida in downtown Miami on Monday, Oct. 29, 2018.

MIAMI_Cesar Sayoc, the South Florida man accused of directing a mail-bomb campaign against Democratic critics of President Donald Trump, started planning the postal attacks in July based on FBI searches of his laptop, cellphone and other devices found in his van, according to a new federal court filing.



© MATIAS J. OCNER/Miami Herald/TNS Attorney Daniel Aaronson talks to the media after attending a hearing for his client, Cesar Sayoc, at the Federal District Court for the Southern District of Florida in downtown Miami on Monday, Oct. 29, 2018.



© MATIAS J. OCNER/Miami Herald/TNS From left, Jamie Benjamin, Daniel Aaronson and Peter Patanzo leave from the Federal District Court for the Southern District of Florida in downtown Miami after a hearing for their client, Cesar Sayoc, on Monday, Oct. 29, 2018.

Federal prosecutors said they are seeking to detain the 56-year-old Sayoc before trial, saying that evidence of his "terror campaign is still being collected but is already overwhelming." Earlier this week, Sayoc's defense attorneys called the prosecution's evidence in a criminal complaint "flimsy stuff."



© MATIAS J. OCNER/Miami Herald/TNS Attorneys Jamie Benjamin, left, and Daniel Aaronson leave from the Federal District Court for the Southern District of Florida in downtown Miami after a hearing for their client, Cesar Sayoc, on Monday, Oct. 29, 2018.

Sayoc, who mainly lived in his van but maintained an official address at his mother's Aventura condo, is being held at the federal detention center in downtown Miami as he awaits a bond and removal hearing in magistrate court on Friday. After that, he is expected to be transferred to New York, where he will be formally prosecuted.

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FBI agents have seized multiple electronic devices from Sayoc's van, a vehicle that doubled as his home and was impounded when he was arrested Friday at an auto parts store in Plantation. His laptop showed Sayoc began doing searches in late July of numerous prominent Democratic figures, such as former President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State and presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, according to the FBI.

Sayoc, a strident Trump supporter whose van was plastered with screeds against Trump foes, also kept a list of potential targets that far exceeded the 15 politicians and others who were mailed manila envelopes containing crudely made pipe bombs in October, New York federal prosecutors said in the court filing.

"The FBI is warning each individual who appears ... to have been identified by the defendant as a potential target, and will continue to do so if additional names are identified in other evidence," the filing said.

one, as previously noted in the criminal complaint. The filing also states there is DNA evidence from 10 of the mail bombs - not two, as previously cited in the complaint. Investigators believe all of the packages were mailed by Sayoc from South Florida.

To further make their case for Sayoc's detention, prosecutors described the former male stripper as a dangerous criminal who was once charged in Miami-Dade County in 2002 with threatening to "blow up" Florida Power & Light over an unpaid electric bill that "would be worse than" the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Sayoc received a probationary sentence for that bomb-threat charge, records show.

Discovery of the hit list of additional mail-bomb targets on Sayoc's laptop was reported by The Miami Herald earlier this week, as he remained locked up behind bars after making his first federal court appearance in Miami on Monday.

Sayoc's defense attorneys were granted more time to prepare a request for a bond, and Magistrate Judge Edwin Torres agreed to set a detention hearing on that matter for Friday.

Outside the courthouse on Monday, Sayoc's defense attorneys, Daniel Aaronson and Jamie Benjamin, downplayed the strength of the U.S. government's criminal complaint against their client after his first court appearance - one that drew dozens of reporters and photographers because of the national notoriety of the case.

Benjamin said the initial federal complaint filed against Sayoc contained little to link him to the crime, calling the evidence "flimsy stuff."

"There is no indication that there are bombs out there that have anything to do with Mr. Sayoc," Benjamin said outside the courthouse before the latest federal filing detailing additional evidence.

The FBI criminal complaint, filed by the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Southern District of New York, charges Sayoc with interstate transportation of an explosive, illegal mailing of explosives, threats against former presidents and certain other persons, threatening interstate communications, and assaulting federal officers. Prosecutors said they plan to file additional charges, most likely in a pending indictment.

The targets listed in the complaint are former President Obama, former U.S. Sen. and Secretary of State Clinton (and, by reference, her husband, former President Bill Clinton), former Vice President Joe Biden, former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, former CIA Director John Brennan and former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, U.S. Sen. Cory Booker, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, billionaire philanthropist and donor George Soros, and actor and director Robert De Niro.

Packages for Soros, De Niro, Clinton, Brennan and Clapper were mailed to the New York area, including those to Brennan and Clapper addressed to the Manhattan offices of CNN.

Sayoc had been living out of a van festooned with pro-Trump stickers and artwork depicting Obama and Hillary Clinton in crosshairs.

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