Church shootings a reminder of homegrown extremists

By ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Confronting extremists, law enforcement in the U.S. has been focusing on aspiring jihadists who align with the Islamic State, overshadowing longstanding concerns about avowed racists, neo-Nazis and anti-government militias.

The South Carolina shootings, experts say, are a reminder of the persistent dangers posed by disaffected people who are bent on violence but whose statements before they act may skate below the radar of police and federal authorities.

The killings at a black church in Charleston appear to fit a grim pattern of violence fueled by hate-filled ideology, joining other attacks by extremists in the past five years that have targeted Jewish and Sikh centers, federal government buildings and police officers.

While the number of Americans professing extremist ideologies fluctuates, the election of President Barack Obama, coupled with a national economic downturn, has in recent years intensified anger among white supremacists and anti-government groups to levels not seen since the time of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, said Mark Pitcavage, director of investigative research at the Anti-Defamation League.

"We're actually about six years into a major resurgence of right-wing extremism, the largest we've had since the mid to late 1990s," Pitcavage said.

The Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, says it has counted more than 30 acts or plots of domestic terrorism or hate-driven rampages since 2010, an increase from the five years before that.

Those include the killings in Kansas last year of three people outside a Jewish community center and Jewish retirement home; a 2011 bomb plot that targeted the route of a Martin Luther King Jr. Day parade in Spokane, Washington; an assault-rifle attack on a Mexican consulate and federal courthouse in Austin, Texas; the murders of six at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, and the slaying of two Las Vegas police officers by a couple with anti-government views who left behind a swastika and a yellow flag bearing the words "Don't Tread on Me."

The culprits are often individuals with little or no association with organized hate groups, acting on their own.

In the Charleston case, 21-year-old Dylann Roof has been charged with nine counts of murder. He is accused of opening fire inside a Bible study last Wednesday night in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Justice Department is investigating the killings as a hate crime.

Roof, currently held on $1 million bond on a gun charge, had displayed on his Facebook page the flags of past white-led regimes in Africa and complained that "blacks were taking over the world" and that "someone needed to do something about it for the white race," according to a friend who spoke with the FBI after seeing him on surveillance images. His erratic behavior in the months before the shootings included showing up dressed in all black at a shopping mall and posing questions in stores that aroused suspicions — such as asking employees how many people were working and when they closed.

An online, hate-filled manifesto purportedly written by Roof surfaced days after the shooting and is being reviewed by the FBI.

But tracking violent extremists before they act is difficult, in part because spouting hateful viewpoints isn't by itself a crime, and many of those who do commit violence aren't leaders of a movement but are disaffected individuals on the periphery of it, said Pitcavage. To some extent, law enforcement faces the same challenges in keeping tabs on Islamic State sympathizers seeking to travel to Syria or commit acts of terror at home — investigations in which the FBI dissects social media communications for evidence of intent to commit a crime.

"They tend not to be actively engaged with the movement," Pitcavage said of lone extremists. "They're not joining organized groups. They're not extensively interacting online. They're not going to events and meetings."

Ron Hosko, a former FBI assistant director and current president of the Law Enforcement Legal Defense Fund, said that when it comes to investigating would-be domestic terrorists, the FBI has long faced the challenge of not treading on free speech rights while trying to make the right call about when hate speech is about to cross the line into illegal action.

"It's a big, free country where people say crazy things, and part of that is just the uncertainty of what somebody will say versus what they intend to do," he said.

AP Photo/David Goldman

U.S. Army Spc. Ron Leary, left and Astride Leary, of Savannah, Ga., pray at a sidewalk memorial in memory of the shooting victims in front of Emanuel AME Church, Monday in Charleston, S.C.

Gov calls for Dixie flag to come down

CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina's governor declared Monday that the Confederate flag should be removed from the Statehouse grounds as she acknowledged that its use as a symbol of hatred by the man accused of killing nine black church members has made it too divisive to display in such a public space.

Gov. Nikki Haley's about-face comes just days after authorities charged Dylann Storm Roof, 21, with murder. The white man appeared in photos waving Confederate flags and burning or desecrating U.S. flags, and purportedly wrote of fomenting racial violence. Survivors told police he hurled racial insults during the attack.

"The murderer now locked up in Charleston said he hoped his actions would start a race war. We have an opportunity to show that not only was he wrong, but that just the opposite is happening," Haley said, flanked by Democrats and Republicans, blacks and whites who joined her call.

Republicans return donations from white supremacist

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican presidential candidates, GOP lawmakers and the lone black Republican in the House are returning donations from the leader of a white supremacist group cited by Charleston church murder suspect Dylann Roof or giving the money to charity.

Rep. Mia Love of Utah, an African-American Republican woman who was elected to the House last year, said through a spokesman that she had returned $1,000 in donations from Earl Holt, leader of the Council of Conservative Citizens.

The campaigns of Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., and Rick Santorum said they would donate the money received from Holt to a fund set up by Charleston's mayor to assist the victims' families.

"I abhor the sentiments Mr. Holt has expressed," Santorum said in a statement. "These statements and sentiments are unacceptable. Period. End of sentence."

Obama uses epithet to make point on podcast

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama says the history of slavery and segregation is "still part of our DNA" in the United States, even if racial epithets no longer show up in polite conversation. He uttered the N-word in making his point.

In an interview, Obama talked about the debates over race and guns that have erupted after the arrest of a white man in the racially motivated shooting deaths of nine black church members in Charleston, South Carolina.

"Racism, we are not cured of it," Obama said. "And it's not just a matter of it not being polite to say nigger in public. That's not the measure of whether racism still exists or not. It's not just a matter of overt discrimination. Societies don't, overnight, completely erase everything that happened 200 to 300 years prior."

Obama's remarks came during an interview out Monday with comedian Marc Maron for his popular podcast "WTF," where coarse language is often part of the discussion. The president uttering a racial slur aloud stirred controversy, especially on social media, and White House spokesman Josh Earnest said later Monday that wasn't surprising.

Obama didn't plan in advance to use the word to be provocative, Earnest said, but was simply making a point during a casual, free-flowing interview. He said he didn't recall ever hearing the president say the racial slur aloud before, but noted that it did appear in his book, "Dreams from My Father."

BRIEFLY

Clues show escaped prisoners may have stopped at hunting cabin

BELLMONT, N.Y. (AP) — Items recovered from a remote hunting cabin might be linked to a pair of convicted killers who escaped from a nearby prison more than two weeks ago, authorities said Monday as searchers swarmed rugged woods in the hamlet in far northern New York.

State Police Maj. Charles Guess said at a news conference that authorities had "specific items" from the Adirondack cabin some 20 miles west of the prison and sent them to labs for DNA and other testing. He would not elaborate on the items but characterized the latest search effort — one of many over the past 17 days — as a confirmed lead.

"There are a number of factors that make this a complex search: the weather, the terrain, the environment and frankly the vast scope of the north country of the Adirondacks," Guess said.

30 killed at crowded mosque by 2 young female suicide bombers

BAUCHI, Nigeria (AP) — Two girls blew themselves up on Monday near a crowded mosque in northeast Nigeria's biggest city, killing about 30 people, witnesses said.

It is the fourth suicide bombing this month in Maiduguri, which is the birthplace of the Boko Haram Islamic extremist group.

Fishmonger Idi Idrisa said one teenager exploded as she approached the mosque crowded with people from the nearby Baga Road fish market, performing afternoon prayers during the holy month of Ramadan.

The second teen appeared to run away and blew up further away, killing only herself, he said.

U.S. to provide weapons, aircraft, commandos for NATO response force

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — The U.S. committed Monday to contribute weapons, aircraft and forces, including commandos, as needed for NATO's new rapid reaction force, to help Europe defend against potential Russian aggression from the east and the Islamic State and other violent extremists from the south.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced the specifics of American contributions to the rapid reaction force a year after President Barack Obama made a commitment to such assistance at the NATO summit last year in Wales.

Carter said the U.S. will provide intelligence and surveillance capabilities, special operations forces, logistics, transport aircraft, and a range of weapons support that could include bombers, fighters and ship-based missiles. It would not provide a large ground force.

Euro leaders optimistic about Greek debt deal later this week

BRUSSELS (AP) — Greece has finally offered economic reforms that creditors consider closer to being acceptable, giving Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras a few days to turn a spirit of goodwill into a deal that might keep the country from a painful exit from the euro currency and roil international markets.

Even though a firm deal between Greece and its lenders to get Athens more loans remained elusive at an emergency summit Monday, leaders from the 19 euro nations and the International Monetary Fund said Tsipras' new reform plan offered the basis to break a four-month deadlock in talks.

U.S. report: Action needed now to slow climate change

WASHINGTON (AP) — Failure to act on climate change could cause an estimated 57,000 deaths a year in the United States from poor air quality by 2100, the Obama administration argued in a report released Monday that warns of dire effects of global warming.

The report says inaction on climate change could cost billions of dollars a year in damage from rising sea levels, increased wildfires and drought, as well as higher costs for electricity to cool homes and businesses in hotter temperatures. The Environmental Protection Agency report argues that action now on climate could save billions in avoided costs for maintenance and repairs on roads and bridges made vulnerable by global warming and save the lives of an estimated 12,000 people in 49 U.S. cities who could die from extreme temperatures in 2100.

The report comes as Republicans in Congress seek to undo the administration's environmental policies, including an expected plan by the EPA to target coal-fired power plants, and days after Pope Francis issued a stern warning about global warming's consequences, especially for the poor and underdeveloped nations. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said last month was the hottest May around the globe in 136 years of global records.

A global health commission organized by the prestigious British medical journal Lancet recommended on Monday that substituting cleaner energy worldwide for coal will reduce air pollution and give Earth a better chance at avoiding dangerous climate change. The panel said hundreds of thousands of lives each year are at stake and global warming "threatens to undermine the last half century of gains in development and global health."

The White House report is part of a weeklong effort to emphasize climate change to mark the two-year anniversary of a "climate action plan" announced by President Barack Obama.

While the most severe effects of global warming would not be felt for decades, the Obama administration said decisions about climate change need to be made now.

"Decisions are not going to wait 50 years," EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy told reporters at a White House briefing. "They are today's decisions."

McCarthy called the report "a wake-up call for some who may not be aware" of the potential damages of climate change.

Obama, in an interview out Monday with comedian Marc Maron for his popular podcast, said he was acting on his own on power plants and other environmental regulations because the GOP-controlled Congress has blocked more comprehensive efforts.

"We'll get that stuff done," Obama said, adding that "it would be a lot better, it would be a lot more helpful, if we had some cooperation from Congress, and if I didn't have the chairman of the energy and environment committee in the Senate holding up a snowball as if that was proof that climate change wasn't happening, that would be useful."

Obama's comments referred to Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, who tossed a snowball in the Senate chamber in February to demonstrate his claim that global warming is a hoax.

The EPA report says actions to slow climate change could save about $3.1 billion in expected costs from sea-level rise and storm surge in 2100, while the power sector could save as much as $34 billion by 2050 in avoided costs for additional electricity for air conditioning and other uses.

An estimated $3 billion in avoided damages from poor water quality could be saved by 2100, the report said.

AP Photo/Jim Cole, File

In this Jan. 20 file photo, a plume of steam billows from the coal-fired Merrimack Station in Bow, N.H.

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