



Department of Justice

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United States Attorney Zachary A. Cunha Press Conference

U.S. Attorney's Office – Thursday, February 15, 2024

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Good afternoon. I'm Zachary Cunha, United States Attorney for the District of Rhode Island. Thank you for coming. Afternoon to announce the filing of federal charges in connection with fires that were set at a North Providence church this past weekend.

Colonel Alfredo Ruggiero, Jr, Chief of the North Providence Police Department; R.I. State Fire Marshall Timothy McGlaughlin and Assistant U.S. Attorney Peter Roklan, who is handling the prosecution I am about to discuss.

As many of you know and have reported, in the early hours of Sunday morning, February 11th, the Shiloh gospel temple – a predominantly black church in north providence- was set afire in what we believe, and as I will discuss momentarily, we have today alleged- was a deliberate act.

At the outset, I want to commend the North Providence law enforcement personnel who responded to the scene immediately and took prompt action to extinguish the flames. Had they not acted as swiftly and surely as they did, there is every indication that the damage to this house of worship would have been catastrophic. As the result of the some truly exceptional police work, which included the personal observations of a North Providence police officer who, while responding to an unrelated call, observed an individual walking with a gas can, officers were able to eventually identify a local gas station where the fuel used to kindle this blaze was purchased.

By means of video surveillance, financial records, and other means, federal state and local law enforcement were able to identify a suspect, who was observed purchasing gasoline and a BIC lighter at the gas station, approximately twelve minutes before the first reports of fire at the Shiloh Temple.

This morning, the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, working in close collaboration with the North Providence Police Department executed a federal search and arrest warrants for the person and residence of Kevin Colantonio, Age 35, of North Providence, Rhode Island.

Mr. Colantonio was taken into custody and has been charged by way of federal criminal complaint with maliciously damaging or destroying by means of fire or explosion any building or other real property in violation of Title 18 U.S.C. § 844(i).

A number of items of evidence were recovered during the court-authorized search, including notebooks and writings that, as the government alleged and referenced in the course of court proceedings today, included phrases like “burn churches down to the ground;” “hunt them down, gun everyone down who isn’t white” and other phrases expressing animus towards racial and religious groups.

This afternoon, the defendant was brought before the district court for an initial appearance before the United States Magistrate Judge; the government requested that he be detained, and the court has granted that request.

I want to emphasize three things: First, our investigation is ongoing. Additional charges, and additional evidence, may well be forthcoming. As many of you know, in the federal criminal justice system, it is at times appropriate to charge and arrest a defendant by means of a criminal complaint. That is what has occurred here. In due course, cases are later presented to the Grand Jury for consideration of an indictment, and at that stage it is not uncommon for additional charges to be levelled. At present, our priority has been to identify and promptly charge this defendant. That has been done. He is in custody, and by order of the court, he will remain in custody.

Second: I want to make clear that, at present, we do not have evidence of an ongoing threat beyond this defendant to the community at this time.

Third: to the clergy and the parishioners of the Shiloh Gospel Temple, let me say this: I cannot imagine how you must feel at this profound violation of what is, and is meant to be, a place of refuge and a place of worship.

To have its sacred precincts violated by fire and by hatred, mere hours before your congregation and your community was to have gathered for Sunday worship is an intolerable violation. To you, and to our broader community, know this: we will seek, and tirelessly pursue, justice against the perpetrators of violence, intimidation and destruction. Acts of violence and intimidation – whether they are motivated by racial animus or religious hatred, or that target and seek to destroy places of worship, will be met by this office, and by this Department of Justice, with the swift and sure response that this conduct demands. Today’s charges are a first step to seek justice in this case.

I want to particularly thank Chief Ruggiero for the exemplary work of the North Providence Police Department and their lockstep collaboration and partnership with federal law enforcement in this investigation.

Likewise the state Fire Marshal’s office, whose superb work has been integral to this arrest and our ongoing investigation.

I’d like to briefly turn this over to ASAC Stankiewicz and then Chief Ruggiero, and then we will address any questions you may have.

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