

Sites Urged To Address Threats Made In Web Posts

By AISHVARYA KAVI

WASHINGTON — The leaders of two House panels sent letters on Friday to eight social media companies demanding that they take “immediate action” to address threats on their platforms toward federal law enforcement officials after a surge in right-wing calls for violence following the F.B.I.’s search of former President Donald J. Trump’s home in Florida.

In the letters, Representatives Carolyn B. Maloney, Democrat of New York and the chairwoman of the House Oversight Committee, and Stephen F. Lynch, Democrat of Massachusetts and the chairman of its National Security Subcommittee, also expressed concern about “reckless statements” from Mr. Trump and some Republican members of Congress. The statements have “coincided with a spike in social media users calling for civil war and violence toward law enforcement,” they said.

The letters were sent to mainstream platforms like Twitter, TikTok and Facebook’s parent company, Meta, as well as right-wing social media sites like Gab, Gettr and Rumble. A letter also went to Truth Social, Mr. Trump’s social media site, which erupted with calls for violence last week, after F.B.I. agents carted away boxes of highly sensitive documents from Mar-a-Lago, the former president’s estate in Palm Beach, Fla. Mr. Trump had apparently taken the materials from the White House and refused to return them.

As Republican lawmakers rallied around the former president, many of them criticized federal law enforcement officials. Mr. Trump described his home as “under siege” by F.B.I. agents, and his political committee asked followers in a fund-raising message, “Will you fight with me?”

The lawmakers’ letters specifically cited comments from Representative Kevin McCarthy of California, the Republican leader, accusing the Justice Department of being “weaponized” against Mr. Trump, and inflammatory tweets from Republican lawmakers. Senator Rick Scott, Republican of Florida, and Representative Lauren Boebert, Republican of Colorado, separately drew compar-

A surge in right-wing calls for violence after the F.B.I.’s search.

isons between the F.B.I. and the Nazi secret police. A state lawmaker in Florida wrote that F.B.I. agents operating there “should be arrested upon sight.”

The House lawmakers asked companies to provide information on the number of threats they had identified against federal law enforcement, how many they had removed and reported to the authorities, and whether they were directly related to the Mar-a-Lago search. The letters also asked for information on the companies’ approaches to removing threats from their platforms.

In the 24 hours after the Mar-a-Lago search, Twitter saw a tenfold increase in posts mentioning “civil war,” according to Dataminr, a tool that analyzes Twitter data. On Telegram, a messaging platform that the lawmakers also contacted, the Proud Boys, a far-right group, posted after the search that “civil war is imminent.”

Truth Social users also posted messages urging others to take up arms and “fight back.” An account matching the name of Ricky W. Shiffer, the Ohio man who tried to breach the F.B.I.’s field office in Cincinnati last week and was killed by law enforcement after exchanging gunfire in an hours-long standoff, posted messages proposing war and urging others to kill federal agents. The House lawmakers cited the episode as an instance of how online vitriol had resulted in real-world violence, and they noted other clear threats to kill F.B.I. agents on sites like Gab.

“Violent rhetoric and personal threats and attacks toward law enforcement officers have deadly consequences,” the lawmakers wrote.

Some Republicans have rebuked their colleagues for the broadsides against law enforcement and urged a more restrained case for defending Mr. Trump. And in a statement last week, Christopher A. Wray, the F.B.I. director, defended the bureau’s actions and denounced attacks on law enforcement.

“Unfounded attacks on the integrity of the F.B.I. erode respect for the rule of law and are a grave disservice to the men and women who sacrifice so much to protect others,” Mr. Wray said. “Violence and threats against law enforcement, including the F.B.I., are dangerous and should be deeply concerning to all Americans.”



Diane Foley, whose son James, a journalist, was one of the Americans killed by the militants, outside the courthouse on Friday with other victims’ family members.

Islamic State Militant Gets Life in Killing of Hostages

By GLENN THRUSH and ADAM GOLDMAN

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — A key member of an Islamic State cell known as the Beatles was sentenced to life in prison on Friday for his role in the abduction, abuse and deaths of four Americans in Syria, ending a long and wrenching effort by their families to bring him to justice.

In April, a jury found El Shafee Elsheikh, 34, guilty on four counts of hostage-taking and four counts of conspiracy after a two-week trial. Former captives detailed relentless beatings, sexual abuse, waterboarding and killings by three young Britons, who were nicknamed the Beatles for their accents and their incessant banter.

The relatives of the four Americans — the journalists James Foley and Steven J. Sotloff as well as the aid workers Kayla Mueller and Peter Kassig — watched intently, at times linking arms, as Judge Thomas S. Ellis III of Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia sentenced Mr. Elsheikh to eight concurrent life terms without parole.

“It is a hollow victory,” said Diane Foley, Mr. Foley’s mother, who noted the sentence was handed down on the eighth anniversary of her son’s beheading. “Our families have lost our loved ones forever.” Judge Ellis, commenting on the declining interest in the case over the years, urged reporters covering the hearing, and the country at large, “to not forget what happened here.”

Mr. Elsheikh, who remained polite, relaxed and largely impassive in his court appearances, already knew he would be confined to a life behind bars before the sentencing

on Friday. He was slated to serve five life terms under mandatory federal guidelines, but lawyers for the Justice Department had requested a heavier punishment.

Yet on Friday, Mr. Elsheikh seemed more fidgety than usual, apparently discomfited by the stiff, green prison jumpsuit he was wearing; he scratched, at times frenetically, under his collar as he listened to family members and one freed hostage, detail his actions.

“It was stressful,” Carl Mueller, the father of Ms. Mueller, said of sitting only a few yards away from Mr. Elsheikh. “I’ve spent so much time staring at the back of his head. But it’s worth it, knowing he’s getting what he deserved.”

Prosecutors viewed every additional year added to his sentence, however symbolic, as vital, given the brutality of the crimes and the desire to send a message to would-be militants. In a graphic 22-page sentencing memo presented to the court, a lead prosecutor in the case, Raj Parekh, argued for the maximum penalty allowed by law, citing the cell’s involvement in many other offenses committed during the Islamic State’s rampage through Syria in 2012 and 2013.

Mr. Parekh, the first assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, made that case in court, too, reciting a litany of the horrors visited on the captives — including one instance in which members of the Beatles forced two men to beat each other senseless while they performed a mocking play-by-play.

He conceded that his description, however vivid, did not capture the depth of the captives’ suffering, and concluded with a reference to Dante’s *Inferno*: “We lack

the vocabulary of such pain.”

Mr. Elsheikh, for his part, declined the judge’s offer to speak up in his own defense on Friday.

“I wasn’t surprised,” said Mr. Mueller, after the three-hour hearing ended. “He’s been cold, with no remorse, because I think he still believes he was doing the right thing.”

Mr. Elsheikh immediately appealed the decision. But Judge El-

A member of a group known for beatings and sexual abuse.

lis quickly rejected that effort, meaning Mr. Elsheikh could be sent to a high-security prison in Florence, Colo.

The families of the victims have worked for years to secure a conviction, pressuring the Justice Department to bring Mr. Elsheikh and an associate, Alexandra Kotey, to justice on American soil. In August 2020, William P. Barr, then the attorney general, agreed to waive the death penalty against the men in exchange for cooperation from British prosecutors.

The families unsuccessfully pressed the Obama administration to negotiate with the Islamic State and pay ransoms for the release of the captives, as other countries did.

Mr. Elsheikh never denied fighting for the Islamic State, but his court-appointed defense lawyers have contended that he was not a member of the Beatles. His supposed involvement in the kidnappings was a result of mistaken

identity given that the captors often wore black balaclavas to conceal their identities, they said.

He has not been directly implicated in the killings, but his participation in — and knowledge about — numerous kidnapping, ransom and murder plots was enough to secure a conviction under the law, prosecutors argued.

For years, American investigators suspected that there were a total of four Beatles who participated in the kidnapping and ransom scheme: Mr. Kotey, Mr. Elsheikh, Mohammed Enwazi, also known as Jihadi John, and Aine Davis.

But earlier this year, an F.B.I. agent testified during Mr. Elsheikh’s trial that there were only three main members of the group, casting doubt on Mr. Davis’s involvement in the ransom, torture and killing of the hostages. In 2017, a Turkish court convicted Mr. Davis, who was born in London, of being a member of the Islamic State. He was recently released from a Turkish prison and is likely to be deported back to Britain, where he could face terrorism charges.

Prosecutors in Northern Virginia have secured a handful of high-profile convictions in Islamic State-related cases, including that of Mr. Elsheikh and Mr. Kotey; Mohammed Khalifa, a Saudi-born Canadian, who was part of the Islamic State’s Ministry of Media, which was responsible for publicizing the beheading of Mr. Foley; and Allison Fluke-Ekren, an American woman from Kansas, who commanded a battalion of female fighters for the Islamic State.

Mr. Elsheikh, Mr. Kotey and Mr. Khalifa were sentenced to life in prison. Ms. Fluke-Ekren awaits

sentencing after pleading guilty in June to a terrorism charge.

The British extremists repeatedly beat the hostages they kept imprisoned in Raqqa, Syria, which the Islamic State claimed as its capital at the time, according to prosecutors. They subjected their prisoners to abuses such as waterboarding, mock executions, painful stress positions, food deprivation, chokeholds that caused blackouts, electric shocks and beatings that lasted 20 minutes or longer.

They also forced the prisoners to witness killings, court papers said.

One of the hostages was Daniel Rye Ottosen, a photographer from Denmark who grew so close to Mr. Foley that he spent weeks memorizing his friend’s farewell letter before being released in June 2014.

On Friday, Mr. Ottosen nervously adjusted the microphone, standing next to the empty jury box in Judge Ellis’s courtroom, one of four witnesses the government called to make the case for a maximum sentence.

Mr. Ottosen, speaking softly as Mr. Elsheikh strained to hear, said that the worst part of his 13 months in captivity was the terrible sense of the unknown, and the long interludes of waiting when he was forced to live with the oppressive silence.

“It was better when they beat us — I could concentrate on my pain — and that’s easier than being with your thoughts,” said Mr. Ottosen, who said that painful pattern had resurfaced in his normal life.

“I don’t think it’s the actual horror that troubles us the most,” he added. “It’s always the silence.”

Graham Is Told to Appear Before Trump Grand Jury

By RICHARD FAUSSET

ATLANTA — A federal judge on Friday turned down a request by Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina to avoid testifying next week before a special grand jury investigating attempts by former President Trump and his allies to overturn his November 2020 election loss in Georgia.

The order, issued by U.S. District Court Judge Leigh Martin May, means Mr. Graham, a South Carolina Republican and staunch Trump ally, is on track to appear in a closed-door session of the special grand jury on Tuesday at a downtown Atlanta courthouse. However, Mr. Graham already has taken his case to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit, which has the ability to step in to postpone his appearance.

Judge May had earlier issued an order forcing the senator to give testimony, but Mr. Graham asked the judge to stay the order while he pursued his appeal in the case. On Friday, the judge wrote that “the public interest would not be served” by granting a stay and delaying Mr. Graham’s testimony.

“In this context, the public interest is well-served when a lawful investigation aimed at uncovering the facts and circumstances of alleged attempts to disrupt or influence Georgia’s elections is allowed to proceed without unnecessary encumbrances,” Judge May, who was appointed by Presi-

dent Barack Obama, wrote.

Mr. Graham is one of a number of Republican witnesses who have fought subpoenas to appear in person before the grand jury. So far, most have lost.

Mr. Trump’s former personal lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, spent hours before the same special grand jury earlier this week, after initially saying that health conditions prevented him from flying to Atlanta from New York. Two other Trump team lawyers who unsuccessfully fought their subpoenas, Jenna Ellis and John Eastman, are scheduled to appear before the grand jury before the end of the month.

A hearing in Fulton County Superior Court has been scheduled for Thursday to consider Gov. Brian Kemp’s efforts to quash a subpoena compelling his testimony. In a motion this week, the Georgia Republican argued that he had been mistreated by the office of Fani T. Willis, the Fulton County district attorney, and claimed that she had subpoenaed him “for improper political purposes.”

Lawyers for Mr. Graham have said that he was informed by Fulton County prosecutors that he was a witness, not a target, in the case.

Even so, prosecutors want Mr. Graham’s testimony for a number of reasons. Among them are two phone calls that he placed just after the 2020 election to Brad Raf-



Senator Lindsey Graham has fought a subpoena to testify before a special grand jury in Atlanta.

fensperger, the Georgia secretary of state, in which Mr. Graham inquired about ways to help Mr. Trump by invalidating certain mail-in votes.

They also want to ask him other questions about what they have called “the multistate, coordinated efforts to influence the results of the November 2020 election in Georgia and elsewhere.” Prosecutors have said in court documents that they expect Mr. Graham’s testimony “to reveal additional sources of information” related to their investigation.

Mr. Graham’s lawyers have argued, among other things, that he should be shielded from testimony under the Constitution’s speech and debate clause, which bars questioning of members of Congress about their legitimate legislative activities. They argue that he made the phone calls to Mr. Raffensperger as part of his work as a senator and a former chair of the Judiciary Committee.

But they were unable to persuade the judge that they had enough of a case to earn a stay. She noted that there were “multi-

ple areas of proper inquiry” in the case that were not related to Mr. Graham’s work as a senator.

And the judge agreed with Ms. Willis’s office that waiting for his appeal to be resolved could cause serious delays and potentially have a negative effect on the special grand jury’s work — particularly when it came to revealing “new categories of information and witnesses, thereby compounding the total delay and hampering the grand jury as it attempts to carry out its investigation expeditiously.”