

COVID rules could be catalyst for U.S. domestic terrorists

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The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is warning that tensions over new COVID-19 restrictions may be seen as a reason for 'extremists' to conduct violent attacks [Mike Stewart/AP Photo]

Washington, August 14 (RHC)-- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on Friday warned of a "heightened" domestic threat from violent "extremists" motivated by new COVID-19 restrictions as well as by anti-government ideology being shared online.

“These extremists may seek to exploit the emergence of COVID-19 variants by viewing the potential re-establishment of public health restrictions across the United States as a rationale to conduct attacks,” the DHS bulletin said.

“Pandemic-related stressors have contributed to increased societal strains and tensions, driving several plots by domestic violent extremists, and they may contribute to more violence this year.”

The department said the U.S. “continues to face a diverse and challenging threat environment leading up to and following the 20th Anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks as well religious holidays we assess could serve as a catalyst for acts of targeted violence.”

“These threats include those posed by domestic terrorists, individuals and groups engaged in grievance-based violence, and those inspired or motivated by foreign terrorists and other malign foreign influences.”

The advisory is an update of a previous assessment and is not based on any specific threat information but rather represents the DHS’s analysis of US conditions.

Law enforcement officials have been concerned by the potential for a new strain of “domestic terrorism” in the U.S. following the January 6 attack on the US Capitol by supporters of former President Donald Trump, many of whom were convinced the 2020 US election was tainted by fraud.

In that incident, thousands of Trump supporters overran police barricades and security checkpoints to invade the US Capitol building where Congress was meeting to certify President Joe Biden’s election win.

One woman was shot by police and three others died of health conditions. A police officer who had scuffled with the rioters died later. More than 570 people have been arrested in connection with the riot including 170 charged with assaulting or interfering with police, according to the FBI.

“These actors are increasingly exploiting online forums to influence and spread violent extremist narratives and promote violent activity,” the DHS said. “Such threats are also exacerbated by impacts of the ongoing global pandemic, including grievances over public health safety measures and perceived government restrictions.”

The U.S. is experiencing a resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic as the Delta variant of the coronavirus spreads rapidly over most of the country. Hospitalisations and deaths are rising sharply in hot-spot regions of seven US states – notably Texas and Florida, where mask-wearing and vaccines have become divisive political issues.

A Tennessee school board decision on August 10 to impose a mask mandate for returning elementary grade students resulted in an eruption of anger from anti-maskers and violent threats against local officials.

In addition to the domestic concerns, the US faces the upcoming 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks by al-Qaeda hijackers that killed nearly 3,000 people.

“Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula recently released its first English-language copy of Inspire magazine in over four years, which demonstrates that foreign terrorist organizations continue efforts to inspire US-based individuals susceptible to violent extremist influences,” the DHS warned.



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