

U.S. government says FBI seized top secret docs at Trump's Florida home

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Washington, August 13 (RHC)-- FBI agents who searched former President Donald Trump's Florida home earlier this week seized 11 sets of classified documents, including some marked as top secret, the U.S. Justice Department says.

The bombshell disclosures were made in a search warrant approved by a U.S. magistrate judge and accompanying documents released four days after the agents searched Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence in Palm Beach.

The search, under the Espionage Act, was conducted as part of a federal probe into whether Trump illegally removed documents when he left office in January 2021 after being defeated by his Democratic Party rival Joe Biden in the presidential election two months earlier.

The Espionage Act, one of three laws cited in the warrant application, dates to 1917 and makes it a crime to release information that could harm national security. The law was initially enacted to combat spying.

Trump, however, rejected the Biden administration's Justice Department claims in a statement posted on his social media platform, insisting that the records were "all declassified" and placed in "secure storage."

"They didn't need to 'seize' anything. They could have had it anytime they wanted without playing politics and breaking into Mar-a-Lago," added the hawkish Republican politician who has vowed to run again in 2024 presidential election.

Although the FBI removed on Monday material labeled as classified, the three laws cited as the basis for the warrant make it a crime to mishandle government records, regardless of whether they are classified. Thus, Trump's claims that he declassified the documents would have no bearing on the potential legal violations at issue.

The Justice Department has used the Espionage Act in high-profile cases in recent years, including former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, former military intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

All three were involved in leaking secret documents unveiling U.S. military atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as massive electronic surveillance of top government officials, groups and even ordinary people across the globe.

The Justice Department underlined in the warrant application approved by U.S. Magistrate Judge Bruce Reinhart that it had probable cause to believe violations of the Espionage Act had occurred at Trump's home.

U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland announced on Thursday that the department asked Reinhart to unseal the warrant, which prompted Trump's claim that the search amounted to political retribution, further suggesting that the FBI may have planted evidence against him.

Since Monday's search, the department has also faced fierce criticism and online threats by right-wing activists, which Garland has censured. Trump supporters and some Republicans in Washington have further accused Democrats of weaponizing the federal bureaucracy to target the former president.

According to U.S. press reports, there are three primary levels of classification for sensitive government materials: top secret, secret and confidential.

"Top secret" is the highest level, reserved for the most closely held U.S. national security information. Such documents are usually kept in special government facilities because disclosure could gravely damage national security.

FBI agents on Monday collected four sets of top secret documents, three sets of secret documents and three sets of confidential documents, local news outlets disclosed on Friday, citing justice department authorities, who further unveiled that agents also collected a set of documents labeled "classified/TS/SCI documents," a reference to top secret and sensitive compartmented material.

Trump, meanwhile, has not yet been charged with any wrongdoing. It remains unclear whether any charges would be brought against him.

FBI agents took more than 30 items including more than 20 boxes, binders of photos, a handwritten note and the executive grant of clemency for Trump's ally and longtime adviser Roger Stone, a list of items removed showed. Also included in the list was information about the "President of France."

The warrant showed that FBI agents were asked to search a room called "the 45 Office" -- Trump was the 45th US president -- as well as all other rooms and structures or buildings on the estate used by Trump or his staff where boxes or documents could be stored.

Meanwhile, the search marked a significant escalation in one of the many federal and state investigations Trump is facing from his time in office and in private business, including a separate one by the Justice Department into a failed bid by his allies to overturn the 2020 presidential election by submitting phony slates of electors.

Trump on Wednesday declined to answer questions during an appearance before New York State's attorney general in a civil investigation into his family's business practices, citing his constitutional right against self-incrimination.

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