

Fearing a ‘Catastrophic Incident,’ 400 Federal Officers Descended on the Baltimore Protests

By [Jason Leopold](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was worried when people took to the streets of Baltimore to protest the death of 25-year-old [Freddie Gray](#), who died after being injured while in police custody. Specifically, they worried that protestors would vandalize a facility that housed three containers holding liquid natural gas and “cause a catastrophic incident.”

“Given the current scope of activity and expected protests this upcoming weekend, the potential exists for these containers to be targeted for vandalism or worse,” says a DHS intelligence update dated April 30.

The facility in question, located in South Baltimore, is owned by energy company Exelon Corporation, which maintained a “small security presence in the area.” But given that the protests over Gray’s death turned violent, the company feared that security could be “breached by protestors” — so it alerted the FBI.

Gray died April 19, sparking two weeks of protests. Six officers were charged with murder, assault and official misconduct in connection with his death, and are due to stand trial in October.



An internal DHS map of Baltimore detailing the locations of protests and riots, along with the locations of critical infrastructure, was used by DHS personnel in the wake of Gray’s death. Click [here](#) for a larger version.

The DHS intelligence document citing the possible “catastrophic incident” is one of more than 700 pages that DHS’s Office of Operations Coordination (OPS) turned over to VICE News this week in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request [pdf below]. The documents provide a rare look at what was of grave concern to the federal government as the Baltimore protests over Gray’s death escalated.

OPS is charged with detecting and preventing terrorist threats to the US. The office obtains intelligence about potential threats from state and local law enforcement, social media, news articles, and other divisions within DHS.

When asked for comment, DHS spokesman Sy Lee pointed VICE News to the DHS OPS [website](#).

Baltimore was not the only city to which DHS turned its attention in the wake of Gray’s

death. Documents also reveal that the department monitored solidarity protests around the country, such as those that occurred in Washington, DC. A DHS message to officials there read:

All,

We are monitoring two separate protests scheduled for this evening. The first will begin with a gathering at the DuPont Circle fountain (1900 P St.) at 6pm. Their call for action on Facebook states:

“Every 28 hours a Black person is killed in America by law enforcement officers. This statistics includes Black women and girls as well. Join us on Wednesday for a speak-out as we remember Rekia Boyd and honor the lives of the many Black Women, Transwomen, and Girls impacted by state-sanctioned violence.... There is no current intel that these marches will be anything but peaceful. However, MPD will be prepared for all contingencies.”

It is not uncommon for DHS to keep tabs on protests around the country, particularly in cities where federal buildings and parks are located that could attract the presence of protesters. The presence of the Federal Protective Service in Baltimore, which is DHS’s police force, was named “FPS Operation Straw Temple.”

An internal document from another DHS component, the National Protection and Programs Directorate (NPPD), said Operation Straw Temple resulted in the “national deployment” of personnel to support FPS’s regional division and protect federal facilities in Baltimore.

“FPS HQ [headquarters] Quick Reaction Force (QRF) on standby for deployment, if required,” the document read.

An April 27 document says more than 400 FPS officers and FPS protective security officers were on duty in Baltimore during the protests “protecting high-risk federal facilities.”

By comparison, the documents say 1,783 National Guard troops were assigned to Baltimore City and 298 were “deployed on the streets ‘on mission.’” More than 400 state troopers from Montgomery, Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Howard, Prince George’s, and Harford counties were there. As were about 300 law enforcement officers from Pennsylvania, 150 from New Jersey, and 45 from Washington, DC.

Additionally, according to an April 30 unclassified “situation update,” detailing the protest activity and the massive law enforcement presence, DHS said it had deployed a “twelve person CBP [Customs and Border Patrol] Special Response Team (SRT)” to support FPS operations, as well as a mobile command vehicle “to enhance interoperability with other law enforcement agencies.”

FPS also “integrated representatives into the Governor of Maryland’s Operations Center and NPPD Baltimore Protective Security Advisor is integrated into the Mayor’s Emergency Operations Center,” the document said.

DHS refers to its monitoring activities as “situational awareness,” and says it does not interfere in the First Amendment rights of protesters. Baltimore was of particular concern to DHS in part because, the documents note, property and businesses were at risk.

“The violent activity continues in northwest Baltimore with the destruction of vehicles and looting of businesses,” says an April 27 email distributed to DHS OPS employees.

DHS advised its law enforcement personnel to pay “special attention” to certain businesses it believed would be targeted by protesters, such as “pharmacies... malls, shopping centers, video games stores and shoe stores throughout the city (Shoe City, Footlocker & DTLR).”

The April 30 intelligence document says the threat information DHS obtained came from “Internet Chatter.” It also said “various threats exist towards law enforcement as such a high level of situational awareness is warranted.”

One alleged threat derived from the media office of the Baltimore Police Department, which claimed that “members of various gangs including the Black Guerilla Family, Bloods, and Crips have entered into a partnership to ‘take out’ law enforcement officers.” Baltimore police issued a press release on April 27, the day of Freddie Gray’s funeral, and the story was [widely reported](#) in the media. The alert was also distributed to police officers nationwide.

But an email sent that day by a DHS employee who works in intelligence & analysis at the Maryland Fusion Center to DHS intelligence officer Earl Rose IV called into question the integrity of the Baltimore Police Department’s [BPD] threat information.

“The gist of this alert asserts that the BGF [Black Guerilla Family], the Bloods, and the Crips, have partnered to ‘take out’ law enforcement. The alert says this is a credible threat, but, I do not know if that ‘credible threat’ means that they actually have specific information or that the 3 groups involved have credibility in taking that kind of action against law enforcement, I would assert that it’s the latter,” wrote the fusion center employee named Brian. DHS redacted his surname.

The fusion center employee, whose name is Brian, said it was “curious that the alert came out from BPD media relations section instead of BPD Intelligence Unit, which is where we typically receive this kind of info.... The tensions have heightened here in Baltimore over the last 72 hours so this alert cannot be considered without that context.”

Hours later, in the same email chain, another DHS employee said, “FBI Baltimore has interviewed the source of this information and has determined this threat to be non-credible,” apparently marking this the first time that it was debunked since the threat first surfaced.

The documents also say that a female Coast Guard officer assigned to the Coast Guard Yard in Baltimore was assaulted and robbed while walking her dog “in the vicinity of the ongoing civil disturbance in the city.” The previously undisclosed incident resulted in the theft of the Coast Guard officer’s wallet, car keys, identification, and vehicle.

As the protests spread to other cities, the FBI weighed in, characterizing the events in Baltimore as “violent criminal activity” with “direct attacks on law enforcement officials” by the protesters, according to an April 28 Joint Intelligence Bulletin from the bureau’s Washington field office and Washington Threat Analysis Center that was included in the DHS cache of documents.

[Related: Read more in ‘Primary Sources,’ the VICE News FOIA blog](#)

The FBI bulletin said the bureau was concerned that a planned protest in Washington, DC's Chinatown district on the evening of April 28 could be used by individuals to "commit acts of violence." The bureau noted that previous protests, such as one held after the shooting death of unarmed African-American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, were "peaceful in nature" but also resulted in attempts to "disrupt economic centers (such as shopping malls, transportation, and sporting events)."

The intelligence bulletin said the information the FBI collected was not intended to "associate otherwise protected First Amendment activity with criminality or a threat to national security, but instead is included only for the purpose of providing situational awareness of activities that may lead to violent action, such as use of force, destruction of property, or expression of true threats, as has occurred recently within the region."

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland
Security**

June 19, 2015

Jason Leopold



Re: 15-0PS-054

Dear Mr. Leopold,

This letter is in final response to your Freedom of Information Act/Privacy Act (FOIA/PA) request to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Operations Coordination (OPS), dated April 28, 2015, requesting all records which includes but is not limited to intelligence bulletins, threat assessments, reports, emails and/or memoranda that mention or refer to Freddie Gray, the protests and riots in Baltimore, Maryland (that started on April 15 through the date the search for responsive records is conducted) in response to the shooting death by Baltimore police of African American Freddie Gray and the shooting death by Baltimore police of African American Freddie Gray. Your request was received in this office on April 29, 2015.

This office has reviewed and processed seven hundred and seventy one (771) pages responsive to your request. Some information has been withheld in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act, (Title 5, U.S.C.552), FOIA Exemptions (b)(6) and (b)(7)c. FOIA Exemption (b)(6) exempts from disclosure personnel or similar files, the release of which would cause a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. This requires a balancing of the public's right to disclosure against the individual's right to privacy. The privacy interests of the individuals in the records you have requested outweigh any minimal public interest in disclosure of the information.

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