



Trump administration charges Don Lemon with federal civil rights crimes related to anti-ICE church protest

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — Journalist Don Lemon has been charged with federal civil rights crimes in connection with an anti-immigration enforcement protest that disrupted a service at a Minnesota church, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security said Friday.

Lemon was arrested Thursday by federal agents in Los Angeles, where he had been covering the Grammy Awards, his attorney Abbe Lowell said. He was expected to appear in court there Friday afternoon.

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The veteran journalist is charged with conspiracy and interfering with the First Amendment rights of worshipers during a Jan. 18 protest at the Cities Church in St. Paul, where a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement official serves as a pastor. Another journalist and two protest participants were also arrested in Minnesota.

Lemon, who was fired from CNN in 2023, has said he has no affiliation to the organization that went into the church and that he was there as an independent journalist chronicling protesters.

"Don has been a journalist for 30 years, and his constitutionally protected work in Minneapolis was no different than what he has always done," Lowell said in a statement earlier Friday. "The First Amendment exists to protect journalists whose role it is to shine light on the truth and hold those in power accountable."

Attorney General Pam Bondi confirmed the arrest of Lemon and the others who were present during the protest.

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"At my direction, early this morning federal agents arrested Don Lemon, Trahern Jeen Crews, Georgia Fort, and Jamael Lydell Lundy, in connection with the coordinated attack on Cities Church in St. Paul, Minnesota," Bondi said on social media.

'Keep trying'

Since he left CNN, Lemon hasn't hidden his identity as an activist. I'm here as

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Fort, an independent journalist, livestreamed the moments before her arrest Friday on Facebook Live.

"I don't feel like I have my First Amendment right as a member of the press because now the federal agents are at my door arresting me for filming the church protest a few weeks ago," Fort said.

It was not immediately clear if Fort and the two other Minnesotans who were arrested have attorneys.

Discouraging scrutiny

The arrests brought sharp criticism from news media advocates and civil rights activists. The Rev. Al Sharpton said the Trump administration was taking a "sledge hammer" to "the knees of the First Amendment."

Kelly McBride, a senior vice president at the Poynter Institute, said the arrests and the recent search of a Washington Post journalist's home were intended to intimidate journalists documenting opposition to the president's policies.

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In an Instagram post, the National Association of Black Journalists said it was "outraged and deeply alarmed" by Lemon's arrest. The group called it an effort to "criminalize and threaten press freedom under the guise of law enforcement."

Crews is a leader of Black Lives Matter Minnesota who has led many protests and actions for racial justice, particularly following George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis in 2020.

After Trump administration officials said earlier this month that arrests would be coming in the church protest, Crews told The Associated Press there's a "tradition" of Black activists and leaders being targeted or subjected to violence.

"Just as being a Black person, you always have to have that in mind," Crews said.

Protesters charged previously

A prominent civil rights attorney and two other people involved in the protest were arrested last week. Prosecutors have accused them of civil rights violations for disrupting the Cities Church service.

The Justice Department launched a civil rights investigation after the group interrupted services by chanting "ICE out" and "Justice for Renee Good," referring to the 37-year-old mother of three who was fatally shot by an ICE officer in Minneapolis.

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Church leaders praise arrests in protest

Cities Church belongs to the Southern Baptist Convention and lists one of its pastors as David Easterwood, who leads ICE's St. Paul field office.

"We are grateful that the Department of Justice acted swiftly to protect Cities Church so that we can continue to faithfully live out the church's mission to worship Jesus and make him known," lead pastor Jonathan Parnell said Friday in a statement.

"Make no mistake. Under President Trump's leadership and this administration, you have the right to worship freely and safely," Bondi said in a video posted to social media on Friday. "And if I haven't been clear already, if you violate that sacred right, we are coming after you."

Richer and Tucker reported from Washington. Associated Press reporters Dave Bauder and Aaron Morrison in New York City; Giovanna Dell'Orto, Tim Sullivan, Steve Karnowski and Jack Brook in Minneapolis; and Josh Funk in Omaha, Nebraska, contributed.

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By — Jaimie Ding, Associated Press

By — Alanna Durkin Richer, Associated Press

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