

More racist text messages uncovered among San Francisco police officers

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BY JOSEPH SERNA

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Newly disclosed text messages in which a trio of San Francisco Police Department officers referred to minorities as "barbarians," "cockroaches" and other slurs should trigger an even larger review of past criminal cases for signs of racial bias, according to the city's public defender.

At a Tuesday news conference, San Francisco Public Defender Jeff Adachi revealed details of text messages traded among three former San Francisco officers that used the N-word to refer to black people, "rag heads" to refer to people of Middle Eastern descent and "beaners" to refer to Latinos.

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The messages were discovered during a recent internal affairs investigation and add to a growing list of racist emails and texts traded among department officers. Already, the racist communications have resulted in the dismissal of 13 pending criminal cases.

"When we're talking about bias policing and racial profiling, there is a direct connection to these associations being made by officers," Adachi said. "That's the kind of mentality that tells you it's OK to shoot, OK to kill, OK to arrest" people of color.

The department said the latest texts were uncovered during a department investigation into allegations that an officer had committed a sexual assault while off-duty. The officer, Jason Lai, has been charged with misdemeanor counts of unlawful access and use of criminal and motor vehicle databases.

Police Chief Greg Suhr said the three officers mentioned at Tuesday's news conference have left the department. A fourth officer is also facing discipline, officials said.

In addition to the other slurs, Lai also used a derogatory term in Chinese to refer to black people and followed that up with a text message referring to them as "a pack of wild animals on the loose."

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"Anytime an officer presents him or herself to be this way, they will be gone," Suhr said. "We will not have this in the San Francisco police force."

Suhr pledged to have all officers undergo training for implicit bias -- the theory that they are unconsciously treating or viewing a certain population differently without realizing it. Adachi said that responsibility in changing the department's culture starts with its officers, not its chief.

"You can have the chief say 'We need to clean house,' but it has to come from the officers themselves," Adachi said. "I'm sure there are many officers that disagree with what Lai said. Let's hear from them."

The texts were the second time an investigation has unearthed blatant racism among San Francisco police officers. A court filing by federal prosecutors last year revealed that 14 other officers had either sent or received [text messages](#) in previous years.

The previous scandal led to the dismissal of 13 pending criminal cases and a [review of 3,000](#) more. Suhr tried to fire several of the 14 officers, but a judge ruled that the department had waited too long to discipline them. That ruling is now on appeal.

Adachi said Tuesday that the recent texts will require at least 207 criminal cases to be reviewed.

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