

Fox News, dogged by misconduct claims, faces new lawsuits

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Allegations of misconduct by senior staff continue to dog Fox News after three women filed a lawsuit Tuesday claiming they were subject to "appalling discrimination" and "years-long relentless racial animus" at the hands of a former executive at the news company.

The women, one former and two current employees from the network's payroll department, and their attorney spoke to ABC News' "Good Morning America" on Wednesday about the allegations, which they described as "appalling" and "insulting."

The lawsuit is the latest in a string of allegations of misconduct by current and former staff members stretching back to last summer.



Fred Prouser/Reuters

In July, then-Fox News Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes was pressured into resigning from the company after former Fox News host Gretchen Carlson filed a lawsuit alleging sexual misconduct on the part of Ailes. Fox News and Ailes denied the allegations at the time.

July: Roger Ailes out as Fox News Chairman For Many Victims of Sexual Harassment, Fear of Retribution Leads to Silence

Since then, other allegations made against company executives have beset Fox News.

In the lawsuit filed Tuesday, which is an amended version of a complaint originally filed last week, Tichaona Brown and Tabrese Wright claim that former Fox News Senior Vice President of Accounting Judith Slater ridiculed black employees at the company.

Among other claims, Brown and Wright allege that Slater mocked "stereotyped speech and complained, for example, that black employees mispronounce" words like "mother," "month" and "ax." The two complainants also claim that Slater complained that the movement was racist and that she mocked it by holding her hands in a surrender position when "when Ms. Brown would stop by Slater's office to say goodbye at the end of day."

"That was definitely the tipping point for me," Brown told "GMA" in an interview Wednesday. "I want a voice for many years of feeling voiceless."

In the same interview, Wright told "GMA" that Slater called their department the "urban payroll division."

Wright recalled a conversation she had once with Slater in an elevator, where she mentioned that she had three children. Slater allegedly replied: "All by the same man?"

"I was shocked," Wright said.

According to Brown and Wright, Slater's racially charged language was not limited to African-Americans. She allegedly said that she believed Chinese men had small penises, nicknamed her train home the "Bombay Express" because of Indian people present and called day laborers "cheap Mexicans."

A third black female employee named as a plaintiff in the lawsuit, Monica Douglas, claimed she "was subjected to the same racially discriminatory treatment experienced by Ms. Brown and Ms. Wright."

In addition, Douglas claims that Slater made fun of her Panamanian heritage and "complained that Ms. Douglas has 'black eyes' as opposed to the 'Aryan race,' who have blue eyes and blond hair."

Douglas went further, alleging that Slater engaged in physical misconduct and mocked her for having a breast removed during breast cancer treatment. In the interview on "GMA," Douglas claimed Slater would often call her "cancer girl" or "one boob girl" in front of her colleagues.

Douglas said she raised the issues with Fox's general counsel, who allegedly told her that Slater is "untouchable" and "cannot be fired because she knows too much."

"That's really the bigger story here. There really is a cover-up going on at Fox at the highest levels," the women's attorney, Douglas Widor, told "GMA" on Wednesday.

"They fired [Slater] knowing for many years that she was engaged in this conduct and that's reprehensible," Widor added. "They let it happen because she was the comptroller and she was privy to all of the information about all the various different settlements that had been going on at Fox for years."

A version of the lawsuit that included only Brown and Wright was filed March 28. Tuesday's filing added Douglas and further allegations.

Responding to the amended complaint, Fox News said in a statement: "We take complaints of this nature very seriously and took prompt and effective remedial action in terminating Judy Slater before Ms. Brown, Ms. Wright and Ms. Douglas sued in court and even before Ms. Wright and Ms. Douglas complained through their lawyer. There is no place for conduct like this at Fox News, which is why Ms. Slater was fired."

Attempts by ABC News to reach Slater for comment were not immediately successful Tuesday.



The amended lawsuit comes a day after Fox News contributor Julie Roginsky filed a lawsuit against the network claiming misconduct on the part of Ailes, the company and current co-President Bill Shine.

In her lawsuit filed on Monday, Roginsky claimed that Ailes encouraged her to hook up with "older, married, conservative men," insisted on a kiss as a greeting and made "sexist" comments about female on-air staff.

The suit also claims that Roginsky faced retaliation when she "refused to engage in a sexual

relationship with Ailes." She also claims that she suffered retaliation at the hands of Shine, who is now co-President of Fox News. Ailes has denied Roginsky's allegations.

Fox News did not comment on the Roginsky suit.

Carlson ultimately settled her case for a reported \$20 million in September.

An investigation published by The New York Times on Saturday reported that five women received settlements from Fox News totaling some \$13 million after making misconduct accusations against top-rated host Bill O'Reilly. Some of these settlements were already known and date back to 2004.

ABC News has not been able to independently verify new information in the Times story. However, as ABC News reported in February, federal prosecutors in New York City are conducting a criminal probe of the news company to determine if any laws or accounting regulations were violated when it paid money to settle misconduct accusations made against Ailes.

Asked about The Times' investigation, 21st Century Fox, Fox News' parent company, said in a statement that it "takes matters of workplace behavior very seriously."

"Notwithstanding the fact that no current or former Fox News employee ever took advantage of the 21st Century Fox hotline to raise a concern about Bill O'Reilly, even anonymously, we have looked into these matters over the last few months and discussed them with Mr. O'Reilly. While he denies the merits of these claims, Mr. O'Reilly has resolved those he regarded as his personal responsibility. Mr. O'Reilly is fully committed to supporting our efforts to improve the environment for all our employees at Fox News," the statement continued.



Richard Drew/AP Photo

In a statement posted on his website on April 1, O'Reilly wrote in part: "Just like other prominent and controversial people, I'm vulnerable to lawsuits from individuals who want me to pay them to avoid negative publicity. In my more than 20 years at Fox News Channel, no one has ever filed a complaint about me with the Human Resources Department, even on the anonymous hotline."

He said that the "worst part" of his job was "being a target for those who would harm me and my employer," and his "primary efforts will continue to be to put forth an honest TV program and to protect those close to me."

Since then, however, pressure has mounted on Fox News and O'Reilly.

O'Reilly's namesake show, "The O'Reilly Factor," brings in more revenue than any show on Fox News, or its main competitors CNN and MSNBC, according to Kantar Media, a market research firm. The firm said that the show brought in some \$126 million in revenue in 2015.

But as of Tuesday a slew of top brands had pulled advertisements from O'Reilly's program, including Allstate, T. Rowe Price, GlaxoSmithKline, BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Hyundai, Constant Contact, UNTUCKit and Sanofi.

In a statement Fox News said, "We value our partners and are working with them to address their current concerns about 'The O'Reilly Factor.' At this time, the ad buys of those clients have been re-expressed into other FNC programs."

Meanwhile, the National Organization for Women, a leading feminist organization, has called on Fox News to fire O'Reilly and demanded "an independent investigation into the culture of sexual harassment at Fox News."

ABC News' Devin Villacis, Shahriar Rahmanzadeh and Morgan Winsor contributed to this report.

The United Nations Security Council will hold an emergency meeting today to discuss the suspected chemical weapons attack that killed more than 50 people in a Syrian town on Tuesday.

UN ambassador Nikki Haley condemned the attack via Twitter, placing the blame on Syria's president Bashar al-Assad.

"Assad must be held accountable for these barbaric attacks against his own people," Haley wrote.

The Syrian military has denied responsibility.

Government officials have not confirmed what chemical was used to attack these civilians in Khan Sheikhoun early Tuesday morning, but experts agree that video released by Syrian activists showing men, women and children struggling to breathe as rescue workers rush to wash the substance off their bodies suggest that chemical weapons were used.

Rebecca Hersman, the former deputy assistant secretary of defense for countering weapons of mass destruction for the Obama administration, told ABC News that the deployment of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict represents one of their most widespread uses in modern history and cited continued failure of the international community to hold those responsible to account.

"I think all of the deaths in Syria are incredibly tragic," Hersman said. "The loss of life is almost beyond imagination. But when we see the loss of life tied to the complete failure of an international regime and the unwillingness of the international community to step up and document these cases and discern a path to accountability and make the security council work the way it's supposed to make the OPCW Executive Secretary work the way it's supposed to, then we should be even more disappointed."

US reviewing airstrikes in Iraq and Syria that may have killed 100s of civilians
Syrian doctors describe treating children after suspected gas attack

White House press secretary Sean Spicer called the attack "an intolerable act" made possible by the "weakness and irresolution" of Donald Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, as Syria descended into chaos.

"Today's attack is reprehensible and cannot be ignored by the civilized world," Spicer said. "These heinous actions by the Bashar al-Assad regime are a consequence of the past administration's weakness and irresolution. President Obama said in 2012 that he'd establish a red line against the use of chemical weapons and then did nothing. The U.S. stands with our allies across the globe to condemn this intolerable act."

Following a 2013 chemical weapons attack that killed more than 1400 people outside of Damascus which a U.S. government intelligence assessment concluded likely used a nerve agent, the Obama administration threatened retaliation but ultimately called off planned airstrikes after Assad agreed to turn over the majority of his chemical weapons arsenal to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, an international watchdog group.

Hersman said world leaders should focus on evidence and accountability. She called for immediate investigations to determine what chemicals may have been used and noted that in February Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution to impose sanctions on the Syrian government for its repeated use of chemical weapons -- for the seventh time.

Russia has been a key backer of the Assad government, supplying government forces with weapons and, since September 2015, launching air strikes against "all terrorist" targets, though U.S. allies in the region have been mistakenly hit on occasion.

She urged the Trump administration to "press on the Russians" and seize the opportunity to lead.

"The United States needs to lead any effort to build a response and hold parties responsible," Hersman said. "Whether it's to impose sanctions to record and document things for future war crimes or to just stand up and make sure the Assad Regime know that we're watching ... It's urgent that we respond, and it's not enough to that we cast concerns about what happened in the past."