

International

'I can't breathe' protests heat up

Curfews imposed in several US cities



MINNEAPOLIS: Protesters gather outside of the Fifth Police Precinct in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Protests continue in Minnesota and around the country after the death of George Floyd in police custody. —AFP

MINNEAPOLIS: Civil unrest flared and curfews were imposed in several major US cities on Saturday as demonstrators took to the streets to vent outrage at the death of a black man shown on video gasping for breath as a white Minneapolis policeman knelt on his neck. From Los Angeles to Miami to Chicago, protests marked by chants of "I can't breathe" - a rallying cry echoing the dying words of George Floyd - began peacefully before turning unruly as demonstrators blocked traffic, set fires and clashed with riot police, some firing tear gas and plastic bullets in an effort to restore order.

The sight of protesters flooding streets fueled a sense of crisis in the United States after weeks of lockdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has seen millions thrown out of work and has disproportionately affected minority communities. In the nation's capital, hundreds of demonstrators assembled near the Justice Department headquarters shouting, "black lives matter." Many later moved to the White House, where they faced off with shield-carrying police, some mounted on horseback.

President Donald Trump said on Saturday that if protesters who gathered the night before in Lafayette Square, across from the White House, had breached the fence, "they would have been greeted with the most vicious dogs, and most ominous weapons, I have ever seen." The full Minnesota National Guard was activated for the first time since World War Two after four nights of arson, looting and vandalism in parts of Minneapolis, the state's largest city, and its adjacent capital, St. Paul.

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz said the deployment was necessary because outside agitators were using protests over Floyd's death to sow chaos. "We are under assault," Walz, a first-term governor elected from Minnesota's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, told a briefing on Saturday. "Order needs to be restored." Separately, US Attorney General William Barr also pointed the finger at extremist instigators, though he and Walz - neither offering evidence to support their assertions - suggested opposite ends of the political fringe were to blame.



Outrage over the death of a black man

National discontent reflected

Civil rights activists said video of Floyd's arrest on Monday - captured by an onlooker's cellphone as he repeatedly groaned, "please, I can't breathe" before he died - triggered an outpouring of rage long simmering over persistent racial bias in the US criminal justice system. But the rapidly spreading protests also coincided with a deep-seated national discontent over the social claustrophobia and economic carnage wrought by the coronavirus pandemic.

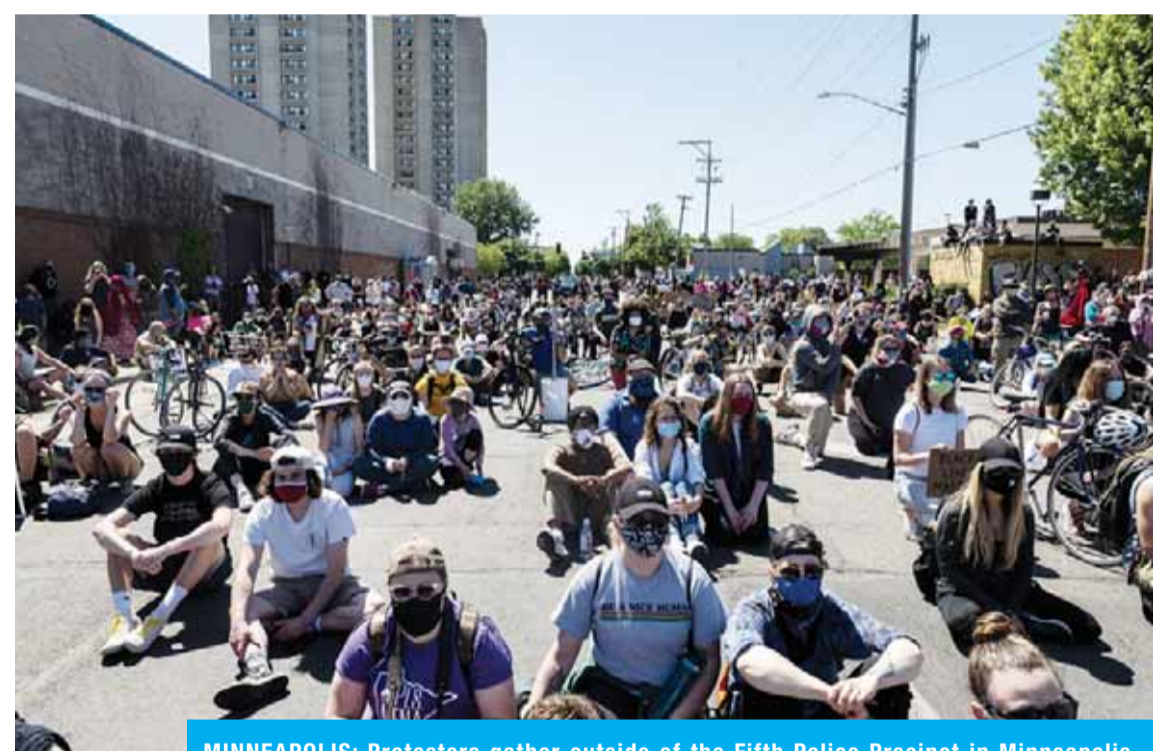
In a surreal moment for Miami on Saturday, police sirens and lights flooded downtown neighborhoods as fireworks began crackling and booming over Biscayne Bay to honor healthcare workers fighting the pandemic. Hundreds of police in riot gear swarmed the area, threatening to arrest anyone, including media, who ventured onto the streets.

Curfews were imposed in several major cities rocked by civil disturbances in recent days,

including Atlanta, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Denver, Cincinnati, Portland, Oregon, and Louisville, Kentucky. Protests also flared on Saturday in Dallas, Chicago, Seattle, Salt Lake City and Cleveland. In an extraordinary move, the Pentagon said it put military units on a four-hour alert to be ready if requested by the Minnesota governor to help keep the peace.

National Guard units also were mobilized by the governors of Ohio, Missouri, Wisconsin and Tennessee. The streets of Minneapolis were largely quiet during the day on Saturday. Several armored National Guard vehicles were seen rolling through town and authorities later closed major highways leading in and out of Minneapolis-St. Paul. At dusk, as the curfew went into effect, police confronted some 500 protesters milling around a burned-out bank and opened fire with tear gas and plastic bullets, sending the crowd scurrying.

Tina Harrison, 32, gasping and coughing as she and two companions poured milk over their faces after being pepper-sprayed, insisted they were present to voice legitimate grievances as protesters, not to incite lawlessness. "We came here as white women ... to protect people of color," Harrison said



MINNEAPOLIS: Protesters gather outside of the Fifth Police Precinct in Minneapolis, Minnesota. —AFP

while they took cover inside an apartment lobby. It marked the fifth night of such clashes, the second since Friday's announcement that Derek Chauvin, the policeman seen kneeling on Floyd's neck, had been arrested on murder charges in Floyd's death.

Floyd, who had worked security for Minneapolis nightclubs, had been suspected of trying to pass counterfeit money to buy cigarettes on Monday evening. Police said he was unarmed. A store employee who had called for help had told a police dispatcher that the suspect appeared to be intoxicated. Three other officers dismissed on Tuesday from the police department with Chauvin, who was known to have worked off-duty security at one of the same nightclubs as Floyd, are also under criminal investigation in the case, prosecutors said.

'Could've killed them'

Anger stoked by Floyd's death was widespread. Thousands flooded Chicago streets for a second day of protests. Cellphone footage shared with Reuters showed an overturned SUV, a patrol car on fire, a

person burning the American flag and a skirmish between demonstrators and police.

In the Brooklyn borough of New York City, video footage recorded by onlookers showed a police squad car driving into a crowd of protesters during a second day of violence after more than 200 arrests were made on Friday. "They could've killed them, & we don't know how many they injured," US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wrote on Twitter, demanding the NYPD officers be brought to justice.

At a late-night news conference, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio suggested protesters were to blame. "The video was upsetting, and I wish the officers hadn't done that," de Blasio said. "But I also understood that they didn't start the situation. The situation was started by a group of protesters converging on a police vehicle, attacking that vehicle." The mayor said flare-ups of violence were primarily instigated by small numbers of outsiders determined to goad police into confrontations, a phenomenon authorities said was playing out across the country. —Reuters

Iran berates US over police killing, slams racism

DUBAI:Iran, always keen to score points against its longtime foe the United States, took Washington to task on Saturday over the killing of a black man by a white police officer that has sparked angry protests over racial injustice. "Some don't think #BlackLivesMatter," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Twitter.

"To those of us who do: it is long overdue for the entire world to wage war against racism. Time for a #WorldAgainstRacism." "The US government is squandering its citizens' resources, whether its adventurism in Asia, Africa, or Latin America..." Zarif said in a tweet partly based on a message that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sent to Iranian street protesters in 2018, but with some of the words changed.

Iran's Foreign Ministry earlier denounced the police killing of the unarmed black man in Minneapolis, which has sparked protests in several cities, some which have turned violent. A ministry statement condemned what it called "the tragic murder of black people and deadly racial discrimination in the United States". "The voices of the protesters must be heard ... (and) the repression of suffering Americans must be stopped immediately," the ministry statement said. —Reuters

Spot where George Floyd died now an impromptu forum

MINNEAPOLIS: George Floyd is surrounded by the names of other police brutality victims in a colorful mural that now looms over the spot where he died, located in a rapidly gentrifying Minneapolis neighborhood. Hundreds of people passed under his gaze Saturday, stopping to pay their respects with a bouquet or written message, and also at a microphone set up at what has become something of a public forum-frequented by a diverse array of mourners, united if by nothing else their pain.

"We are George, we can't breathe," the crowd chanted, repeating some of the 46-year-old African American's last words as he lay dying under an officer's knee that pressed into his neck for nearly nine minutes until well after he was motionless. On Friday the white officer was charged with one count of third-degree murder-unintentionally causing a death-and one count of negligent manslaughter. Standing beneath the mural with signs reading "Charge all four," and "Jail all racist killer cops," mourners said they wanted the other three officers who were present to be arrested as well.

Here, in broad daylight, speech is intended to be peaceful, in contrast with the looting and burning that has taken place during protests which have unfolded at night since Floyd's death. The microphone was thus quickly snatched from a young man who began to pontificate on black citizens' constitutional right to bear arms. But Christina Gonzalez, a 33-year-old New Yorker, quickly came to his defense: "When they pull the mic from that brother for saying something like that, I feel like I have to speak on it."



LOS ANGELES: A driver burns-out tire while a passenger seats on the window gesticulating to the Police in Downtown Los Angeles. —AFP

'It's just draining'

Mixed together in the crowd were blacks, whites, young and old-one man was so enraged by Gonzalez's comments that he began insulting her before being gently pushed away. "We're emotional, we are the melting pot-more like a salad, because we don't really blend well together, everybody's coming from different places," Gonzalez said, noting that some in the crowd had experienced police violence themselves, making them particularly sensitive. Alex Washington, a 37-year-old municipal worker, said he has been apprehended for biking on a sidewalk and even for running fast while crossing the street. "I can't

tell you how many times I've been put in the back of police cars and I have a perfectly clean record," he said.

"To walk in your own neighborhood and feel hated, it's just draining. I'm sick and tired of feeling drained by hatred in my own community," he said. Nonetheless, he felt the diversity of people who had come to pay respects to Floyd was "so beautiful." Keira, who did not wish to give her last name, said the broad support was comforting. "I'm here because I no longer fear for my life as a black person. I feel comfortable now knowing that I got support from the community," she said, hoping that the unity would last.