

International

Police torn between shame and pride for their badge

US police officers at the center of demonstrations

NEW YORK: US police officers at the center of demonstrations that have roiled the country are caught between their commitment to the job and recognition that reforms are needed to address institutional racism within their ranks. From California to Massachusetts, several officers interviewed by AFP said they were horrified by the killing of George Floyd while in police custody - a tragedy that sparked nationwide protests against police brutality and racism. But those interviewed also hit back at accusations that the actions of the officers involved in Floyd's death reflected the values of law enforcement officers across the country. "I am not Derek Chauvin... He killed someone. We didn't. We are restrained," Michael O'Meara, head of New York state's Police Benevolent Association, angrily said this week at a press conference. Chauvin is the officer who pressed his knee on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes. "Everybody's trying to shame us into being embarrassed about our profession," O'Meara added. "Stop treating us like animals and dogs and start treating us with some respect."

Shaun Willoughby, president of the Albuquerque Police Officers' Association in New Mexico, said Chauvin had clearly committed a criminal act that all police officers were ashamed of and it was unfair to paint everyone in uniform with the same brush. "I feel discriminated against, so do my officers," he told AFP. "We're just out here trying to do the best job that we can to protect our community and provide for our families, and now because I wear a badge I'm a problem of systemic racism in the country. "Law enforcement all over the country gets left holding the bag for the actions of a criminal in Minneapolis," he added. Experts however say that Floyd's death was not an isolated incident but added to long-running

anger and distrust of police officers among America's black communities.

'Happening far too often'

"There is a long American history of harm and violence imposed on black Americans under color of law that policing as an institution has to acknowledge," said Louisa Aviles, director of group violence intervention at the National Network for Safe Communities. Franklin Zimring, a law professor at the University of California, Berkeley and author of

“ I am not Derek Chauvin... He killed someone. We didn't ”

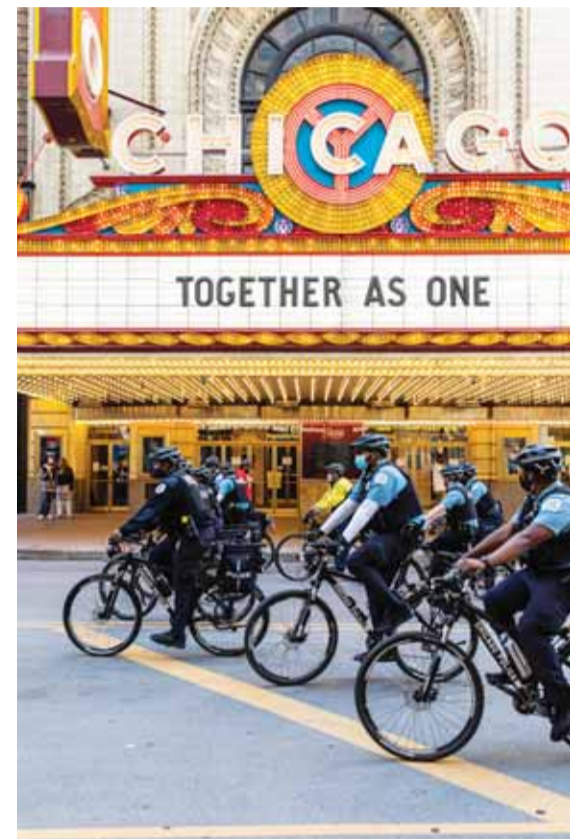
"When Police Kill," noted that officers in the US on average kill three people a day. "At least half of those killings are not necessary to preserve the police officers' lives or anybody else's," he said.

African Americans represent the majority of those killed with studies showing that one in every 1,000 black men in the US will die at the hands of police. "It's happening far too often, scenes where black people and people of color in general are dying at the hands of law enforcement, usually for really minor offenses," said Ben Kelso, president of the San Diego chapter of the National Black Police Association. "We spend a lot of

hours on what they call 'perishable skills,' which is driving and shooting and arresting people and things like that," he added. "But we don't spend as much time on just learning to talk to people. Because when it's all said and done, the biggest weapon police officers have every day is their mouth."

A growing list of police departments across the United States have already imposed a ban on neck restraints similar to the one that killed Floyd and reinforced disciplinary measures. Steps are also being taken at the federal level to carry out reforms. O'Meara, whose union represents some 40,000 police officers, said it was essential that law enforcement be included in the conversation as stakeholders. "This perception that we are racist dogs, that's not what we are," he told AFP. "That's not what the overwhelming vast majority of police officers are." Branville Bard Jr, chief of police in Cambridge, Massachusetts, said as a black man he has often fallen victim to racism and was in favor of tougher sanctions against bad officers.

"I can't tell you how many times I'm pulled over," he said. "And I identify myself... and it never escalates. But I'm always in fear that it could because I carry a gun and black skin at the same time." But some in law enforcement say they are being used as scapegoats for larger problems in society and reject growing calls to defund the police. "It's ironic and it's hurtful because we're out every day trying to serve and protect the public and there are millions of interactions every day with police and the public that are positive," said a 34-year-old New York officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity since he was not authorized to make public comments. "We try to be everything to everyone and we're stretched too thin and that's when mistakes are made." —AFP



CHICAGO: Chicago police officers on bikes follow crowds during a protest on June 13, 2020 in Chicago, Illinois. Protests erupted across the nation after George Floyd died in police custody in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25th. —AFP

100 years on, US pardons black man accused of rape

WASHINGTON: On June 15, 1920, three African-Americans were lynched in Duluth, Minnesota, accused without proof of raping a white woman. One hundred years later, the northern US state on Friday pardoned another black man convicted of the crime, which he repeatedly denied committing. Max Mason, who died in 1942, has become the first person to benefit from a posthumous pardon in Minnesota, a potent symbolic action at a time when Americans are confronting the roots of a racism that still taints substantial portions of society.

The pardon request was filed well before the May 25 death of George Floyd, a handcuffed black man who died when a white Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee against Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes. The killing, caught on video, triggered coast-to-coast protests, making the Mason pardon timely. "100 years late, overdue justice has been done," Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison said on Twitter. "The last weeks in MN have shown us we have a need for a better quality of justice. A pardon for Max Mason is another long-delayed step toward it."

On June 14 of 1920, young white woman Irene Tusken and a male friend attended the circus in Duluth. The next day, the man told his father they had been attacked by black circus troupe members and that Tusken was raped. Police rounded up and interrogated several black men including Mason, but the couple was unable to identify anyone as one of the attackers. According to court documents, a doctor examined the woman but could find no evidence of assault. Mason was released, and he rejoined the traveling circus as it departed Duluth. But police re-arrested him along with several other men.

Later that night, an angry mob broke into the police station and grabbed three men, dragging them through the streets before hanging them in front of thousands of people. Duluth is the home town of famed folk singer Bob Dylan, whose 1965 song "Desolation Row" was written in part about the crime. The city has apologized for the lynching and in 2003 erected a memorial to the three victims. Mason escaped the fate of those three men. But he was sentenced to 30 years in prison, in part because it was learned that he and Tusken were both infected with gonorrhoea, a common venereal disease. "If he had been a white man, I am rather doubtful if he would have been convicted," county attorney Mason Forbes said in 1923 pardon request. —AFP

Truncated will: India landowner bequeaths land to elephants

PATNA: An Indian landowner has willed most of his land to two elephants he said saved his life from gun-toting criminals, a decision that has upset his wife and children. Akhtar Imam, from a village in the eastern state of Bihar, said he changed his will to bequeath 2.5 hectares (6.2 acres) to gentle giants Moti (pearl) and Rani (queen). "I simply don't want hardship for my Moti and Rani, who are no less my family," Imam, 50, told AFP as he bathed the pachyderms on a swelteringly hot day. "I don't want my elephants to face the fate of orphaned or abandoned captive elephants who die on the streets or in deserted fields due to lack of proper care," Imam, who runs a wildlife trust, raised Moti, aged 20, and Rani, aged 15, from when they were born to another domesticated jumbo that has since died.

Each elephant has two staff looking after them day and night, and roam his property freely. He said his love for the pair grew even more when they saved him from "gun-carrying criminals" who he said tried to kill him last year while he slept. "When I opened my door to see why the elephants were trumpeting, I saw they were chasing criminals nearby," he said. "I am alive due to my elephants who had worked like bodyguards to me." —AFP

Atlanta police chief resigns after officer kills black man

WASHINGTON: The police chief in the US city of Atlanta resigned after an officer fatally shot a black man during an arrest, the mayor said Saturday, with the new killing injecting fresh anger into protests against racism and police brutality. Images on local media showed hundreds of protesters in the streets on Saturday and flames engulfing the Wendy's restaurant where 27-year-old Rayshard Brooks was killed. The officer who shot Brooks was dismissed Saturday and identified by Atlanta police as Garrett Rolfe. The second officer was placed on administrative duty, according to ABC News.

Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms - who has been touted as a potential running mate for Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden - earlier announced the resignation of Chief Erika Shields. Wendy's employees called police on Friday night to complain that Brooks was asleep in his car and blocking other customers on the premises, an official report said. He failed a sobriety test and resisted when police tried to arrest him, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) said. Surveillance video showed "that during a physical struggle with officers, Brooks obtained one of the officer's Tasers and began to flee from the scene," the report continued. "Officers pursued Brooks on foot and during the chase, Brooks turned and pointed the Taser at the officer. The officer fired his weapon, striking Brooks," it said.

Brooks was taken to hospital but died after surgery, it said, adding that one officer was injured. An attorney acting for the dead man's family said disproportionate force was used in the confrontation. "In Georgia a Taser is not a deadly weapon — that's the law," L. Chris Stewart told reporters. "Support came, in I think

George Floyd's death prompts soul-searching

WASHINGTON: Confederate monuments are coming down and statues of Christopher Columbus are being toppled as Americans grapple with the ghosts of the country's racial history in the wake of George Floyd's death. "It seems like maybe we've hit a tipping point in the retelling of the narrative of who we are as an American people," said David Farber, a history professor at the University of Kansas. "We're seeing tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of Americans wrestling with fundamental questions of what do we do with the unsavory - and, let's be frank, even immoral - aspects of our past." The May 25 killing of Floyd, an African American, by a white police officer in Minneapolis has ignited mass protests for racial justice and police reform across the United States.

But the death of the 46-year-old has also triggered a national soul-searching of the country's checkered past. Demonstrators in several US cities have targeted monuments to generals and politicians of the pro-slavery Civil War South, pulling down a statue in Richmond, for example, of Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president during the 1861-1865 conflict. "The symbols of the Confederacy are, I think, the most polarizing of these memorials. But it extends all over the United States," Farber said. "In New York it's statues to Columbus. In New Mexico, there's a statue of a conquistador who's a genocidal figure in the eyes of the Pueblo Indian people. "There's high schools all over the United States named for John Calhoun," a former vice president who was an avowed proponent of slavery.



CALIFORNIA: People gather during a vigil around a makeshift memorial at the tree where Robert Fuller was found dead outside Palmdale City Hall on June 13, 2020, to demand a full investigation into the death of Robert Fuller, a 24-year-old black man found hanging from a tree, in Palmdale, California. —AFP

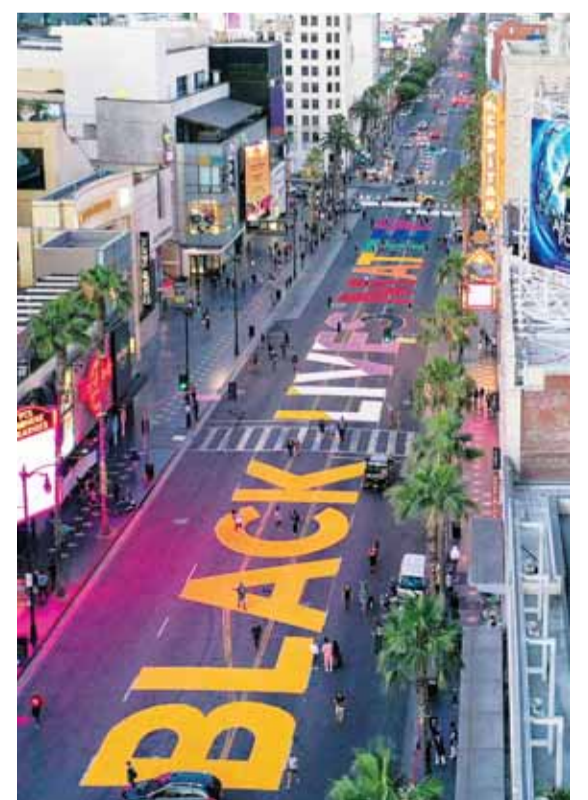
2 minutes. He would have been boxed in and trapped. Why did you have to kill him?" "(The officer) had other options than shooting a man in the back." Brooks has four children, Stewart added, and had celebrated the birthday of his eight-year-old girl earlier on Friday. His death is the 48th shooting involving an officer the GBI has been asked to investigate this year, according to local newspaper the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Fifteen of those incidents were fatal.

The unrest comes as the US faces a historic reckoning on systemic racism, with mass civil unrest ignited by the May 25 killing of another African-American man, George Floyd, while in police cus-

tody. Floyd died after a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes. Protests which spread first around the country then the globe, have forced a conversation on the legacies of slavery, colonialism and white violence against people of color, as well as the militarization of police in America. Police chief Shields had worked for Atlanta's police department for more than two decades. "Because of her desire that Atlanta be a model of what meaningful reform should look like across this country, Chief Shields has offered to immediately step aside as police chief," the mayor said in televised comments. —AFP

'Public outcry'
Farber noted that the debate over Confederate memorials has been going on for years and civil rights marchers of the 1950s and 1960s decried the fact that they were "walking down streets named after avowed racists and white supremacists." The efforts to remove Confederate monuments gathered momentum after a white supremacist shot dead nine African Americans at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. "The pace of it is now increasing because of public demand and public outcry," said Andra Gillespie, an associate professor of political science at Emory University. "What I think we're seeing is a reexamination of lots of our assumptions and a challenging of various forms of history as it affects African Americans," Gillespie said. "This is a moment where the focus is on anti-black racism but it is not excluding other forms of racial oppression," she said. Laura Edwards, a Duke University history professor, said "it's sinking in to people that these symbols have political meaning and are problematic in ways they had not fully appreciated." "It's less easy to call this heritage, for instance," Edwards said in a reference to arguments often used by opponents of removing Confederate symbols who claim it is erasing a proud Southern history. Edwards said she was "blown away" when the NASCAR race car franchise banned the display of the Confederate flag at its events. "Amongst all the sports it was the one that embraced what they imagined to be white Southern heritage," she said. "Symbols associated with white supremacy and the Confederacy had been part of the brand."

'Broader reckoning'
The toppling of Confederate statues and those of Columbus are "very much related," Edwards said, in that both embody the "violent colonization of the United States." "The first part was Europeans coming and making claims to a place that belonged to indigenous people and then engaging in genocide to wipe



LOS ANGELES: Photo shows an aerial view of Hollywood Boulevard painted with the words 'Black Lives Matter' as protests continue in the wake of George Floyd's death on June 13, 2020 in Los Angeles, California. —AFP

them away." That was followed by the importation of slaves from Africa — what Alan Kraut, a history professor at American University, called "the original sin that we've never been able to get beyond." —AFP