

# Paris hit by anti-police riots

Antoine Lerougetel  
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Two boys died on the evening of October 27 while fleeing from the police on a suburban council estate that houses poor and immigrant workers. The deaths of the boys, in Clichy-sous-Bois in Paris' northern suburbs, sparked violent confrontations between mainly immigrant youth and 400 to 500 riot police dispatched by Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy.

Running battles between the youth and the police continued through the weekend. Some 70 cars and many rubbish bins were incinerated. The police fired around 150 rubber and plastic bullets and an unspecified number of tear gas canisters, and have continued to maintain a heavy presence.

Sarkozy, the chairman of the ruling Gaullist party and leading contender for the candidacy of his party in the 2007 presidential elections, has been building his reputation on an aggressive law-and-order platform. He immediately pledged to beef up the armoury of officers' "non-lethal" weapons. He also announced that seventeen companies of riot police and seven mobile police brigades would be permanently stationed on "difficult" housing estates, and that plainclothes officers would be sent in to identify "gang leaders, drug dealers and ringleaders."

The events of Thursday evening on the Chêne-Pointu estate demonstrate the intense fear and hostility to the police and representatives of the state felt by the inhabitants of France's suburban council estates. These are usually relegated to the periphery of towns and cities.

They contrast with the often impeccably maintained town centres and are largely made up of high-rise tower blocks that are lacking in amenities, especially for the youth. The unemployment rate on such estates is often more than five times the national average of ten percent. Paris is ringed by such neighbourhoods, run for the most part by Socialist Party and Communist Party town halls and local councils.

At about 5.30 p.m. last Thursday, Bouna, 15, Zyed, 17, and Metin, 21, climbed over the three-metre-high, barbed-wire topped wall of an electricity plant. Bouna and Zayed were burnt to death and Metin is in hospital being treated for severe burns.

A youth told the press: "They were coming back from a football match. They had decided to kick a ball around..." There are slightly different versions, but it is clear that the police arrived and the boys ran away from them.

The state prosecutor for Bobigny told the press: "It's all the more tragic for the fact that they were not delinquents and they had done nothing wrong." This was a refutation of the initial statements of Sarkozy and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin that the boys had been involved in theft and vandalism.

The lawyer representing the victims' parents, Jean-Pierre Mignard, asked an essential question: "Why did young people, who were doing no wrong, feel so threatened that they made their way into such a dangerous place?"

The newspaper *Le Figaro* of October 29 reported: "Many of them (the inhabitants of the commune), shocked by the events, yesterday spoke out angrily against police behaviour. 'The cops harass us and play at being cowboys, but they are never there when we need them,' said one."

Insults, arbitrary arrest, violence by police against youth and anyone who looks foreign are so commonplace in France that they are rarely deemed worthy of attention by the media. The *Le Monde* editorial of October 31 reported that "2004 was marked by an 18.5 percent increase in complaints of illegal police violence." All the police carry firearms and police shootings are a persistent feature of French life.

Sarkozy has been making provocative statements against youth from the council estates. He has promised to sandblast the "scum" and "gangrene" from the

estates. He has also pledged to visit a “difficult” area every week.

Prime Minister Villepin and President Jacques Chirac have made no comment about Sarkozy’s provocations. In the government, only the junior minister for equal opportunity, Azouz Begag, has spoken out against Sarkozy. On October 30, he declared: “You must not call the suburban youth ‘scum,’ you must not tell them that you’re going to go for them and send the police against them.”

*Le Figaro*’s October 31 editorial expressed a certain nervousness in right-wing circles: “Nicolas Sarkozy’s recent statements on the need to ‘eradicate the gangrene’ in the suburbs and ‘clean up the council estates with sandblasters’ are ill-considered in form. But in content?”

Taking their lead from France’s top cop, the police patrolling the Clichy-sous-bois estates can be seen on a video, taken with a mobile phone, shooting rubber and plastic bullets at very close range and shouting: “Come back you bunch of bastards.”



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