Tens of thousands continue UK protests against racism and police brutality

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Over the weekend, more than 100,000 people across the UK continued to protest the death of George Floyd who was killed by police in the US city of Minneapolis on May 25.

Protests went ahead despite Boris Johnson's Conservative government warning they could become a vector for further spreading coronavirus. The government's warnings were hypocritical in the extreme, with the "phased" ending of the lockdown announced on May 10, including the re-opening of primary schools last Monday, in defiance of warnings from leading scientists.

Protesters, many wearing facemasks, turned out in large numbers, rejecting statements Friday by senior ministers including Home Secretary Priti Patel that they stay at home.

As with last week's protests against Floyd's death, they were multi-racial and youthful in composition, with few demonstrators over 30 years of age.

In London on Saturday, around 40,000 protested in Parliament Square and Whitehall, marching to the US embassy across the River Thames in Battersea.

Many chanted George Floyd's name and brought home-made placards with messages including, "Black Lives Matter," "No Justice, No Peace," "No Freedom till we're equal," "None of us are equal until all of us are equal," "Fight racism, fight exploitation, with solidarity," "Am I Next?" and "Imagine what ISN'T caught on camera". In reference to the decades-long experience with police brutality in the UK, many placards read "The UK is not innocent."

Speaking to the BBC at the London protest, Sarah Law, a 27-year-old train manager, said: "I don't want my future children to experience what I have. It's time for us all to unite together regardless of our race and stand up for what is right."

Rawle, a 27-year-old teacher from Leicester, said he was protesting because he was "exhausted of being treated as a second-class citizen" and "to hopefully spark some change."

Media coverage of the events was almost exclusively focused on clashes between police riot squads and some protesters at Downing Street on Saturday evening. At around 6pm, riot police were drafted in alongside mounted police, attacking protesters. The *Guardian* reported, "Police were reinforced, with more than 150 officers standing off with a crowd of up to 500 who chanted choruses of "Boris Johnson is a racist" and also accused police of racism as they were kettled [surrounded by police and not allowed to leave].

"Many [protesters] opposed violence and discouraged the throwing of projectiles, but numerous others were determined to oppose officers and those remaining were reportedly kettled into Sunday, with legal observers reporting protesters had to say their names if they wanted to leave."

A protest of around 15,000 was held in Manchester on Saturday, filling one of the city's main squares, Piccadilly Gardens, adjacent Market Street and other streets. People were still arriving on public transport and on foot nearly an hour after the protest began. The protests then marched through the city centres and other main squares. Among the banners being displayed were "The UK is not innocent", "The UK is Guilty," "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," "No humanity in Police Brutality" and "The World is my country, the World is ours."

Flowers and home-made placards were placed at a nearby mural that was painted in memory of George Floyd last week.

Several thousand attended the protests at Sheffield's Devonshire Green. Libby, an 18 year old student, said,

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“I took part in Sheffield’s Black Lives Matter protest to stand in solidarity with people who have been affected by police brutality all over the world with George Floyd’s tragic death being a trigger of the anger built up over many years.”

Other cities and towns where demonstrations were held Saturday included Leicester, Newcastle, Ipswich, Luton, Watford, Milton Keynes, Bath, Gloucester, Cardiff, Swansea, Bangor, Caerphilly, Belfast and Derry. Around 2,000 protested in Belfast’s Custom House Square.

Over 3,000 protested at the US Embassy in Dublin. Other protests in Ireland were held in Limerick and Galway, with up to 800 protesting in Galway.

Among the placards at the Dublin protest were “We can’t breathe,” “Enough is Enough,” “Abolish the Police,” and No Justice, No Peace”. A number of placards denounced the Direct Provision system of asylum seeker accommodation used in the Republic of Ireland. One read “Direct Provision is a Prison”. The system was introduced in 2000, with strict access control—under it, asylum seekers have no right to work and do not receive any social welfare payments. Instead they receive an allowance of just €21.60 per week.

At all the demonstrations, protesters brought placards demanding “Justice for Belly Mujinga”. Belly, a 47-year-old rail worker, died on April 5 in hospital in Barnet, leaving behind her distraught husband, Lusamba Gode Katalay, her 11-year-old daughter and family. On March 21, Belly had pleaded with her manager at London’s Victoria Station not to be sent out to the station platform, as she was in an at-risk category and did not have personal protective equipment (PPE). Her appeal was ignored. Soon after she and her colleague were spat at by a man claiming to have COVID-19. Within days, Belly and her colleague had fallen ill with the virus. Last week, the British Transport Police stated that “no further action” would be taken in relation to what it described as an “incident” at Victoria station.

In just a few days, over 1.5 million people have signed a petition demanding justice for Belly.

On Sunday, another large protest was held in London, with thousands gathered at the US Embassy packing the main road adjacent to the building. Among their chants were “George Floyd, George Floyd” and “Trump Out”. Thousands more demonstrated in Parliament Square, Trafalgar Square and Downing Street. Police mounted barricades on Whitehall in front of the high gates that are already in place to stop the public’s entry into Downing Street.

Outside the capital, more protests by many thousands of people were held in several cities including Bristol, Manchester, Norwich, Coventry, Derby, Colchester, Edinburgh, and Glasgow.

In Glasgow, thousands demonstrated at the city’s Glasgow Green. In Edinburgh, thousands gathered at Holyrood Park. In Bristol, where thousands of people gathered, protesters pulled down a statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston and dumped it into the harbour of the Avon river.

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