

UK: London police attack protesters following murder of Sarah Everard with police officer main suspect

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London's Metropolitan Police attacked a peaceful vigil held on Clapham Common Saturday, making four arrests and brutally assaulting women who attended.

The protest was held amid widespread anger following the murder of 33-year-old Sarah Everard.

Earlier on Saturday, just prior to the vigil, Met police officer Wayne Couzens appeared at Westminster Magistrates' Court after being charged with Everard's kidnap and murder. She went missing when walking home to Brixton from Clapham in south London at around 9.30pm on March 3. The court was told that Everard's body was found inside a builder's bag in woods in Kent and identified by her dental records.

Couzens is a firearms officer from the elite Parliamentary and Diplomatic Protection Command. He was arrested on March 9. Anger grew as it emerged that police did not progress an investigation into two alleged flashing incidents against staff at a McDonald's restaurant in south London on February 28, three days before Everard was attacked.

The vigil went ahead despite moves by the police, backed by the High Court, to ban a vigil set to take place later Saturday night organised by a newly founded group, Reclaim These Streets. This was banned on the pretext that it was not compliant with COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings.

On Friday, Reclaim These Streets brought an urgent legal action at the High Court seeking a ruling that a ban on outdoor gatherings under coronavirus regulations be "subject to the right to protest". The group wanted what they described as a policy by the Met of "prohibiting all protests, irrespective of the specific circumstances" ruled unlawful. These requests were refused by Justice Holgate, who said it would "not be appropriate" to make such a declaration. It was up to the organisers and police to

discuss the "application of the regulations and the (rights to freedom of expression and assembly)" in relation to the event.

As the vigil began in the early evening, a speaker attempted to address the mainly female audience, the vast majority of whom were wearing masks. A report in the *Guardian* explained, "As she spoke, police began pushing their way on to the bandstand, some of them trampling the tributes [of flowers and candles laid in Everard's memory] and tried to push the speakers aside."

A wall of police sealed off the bandstand area and instructed the crowd to disperse, or face arrest. They then began to violently attack and manhandle those in attendance. One woman was held down face down on the bandstand by two officers, handcuffed, arrested, thrown in a police van and told to give her name and address. If she did, she would only get a fine, the police threatened. Others were shoved to the floor and punched by police.

As an arrested woman was led away, the crowd chanted at police "Shame on you", 'Let them go' and "Arrest your own". Those arrested were accused of public order offences and of breaching coronavirus rules.

The vigil was one of a number that went ahead Saturday including in Birmingham, Leeds, Bristol, Edinburgh and Cardiff. On Sunday, thousands of people protested Saturday's attack at the Met's HQ in Scotland Yard, London before moving to Parliament Square in Westminster.

The police's determination to prevent the vigil and protests against Everard's murder was highlighted by the fact that the clampdown took place just one hour after Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge and the wife of Prince William, the heir to the throne, made an unannounced visit to Clapham Common to lay daffodils in Everard's memory. A statement from her residence,

Kensington Palace, said that Middleton “remembers what it was like to walk around London at night before she was married” and “wanted to pay her respects to the family and to Sarah”. Middleton’s visit was naturally afforded mass publicity.

The indiscriminate attacks on the vigil prompted widespread condemnation of the police and deep embarrassment in ruling circles. Calls were made for the resignation of Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick, including by Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey.

Conservative Home Secretary Priti Patel, who has built her career on a never-ending law and order agenda, felt obliged to tweet, “Some of the footage circulating online from the vigil in Clapham is upsetting. I have asked the Metropolitan Police for a full report on what happened.”

The fact is that the police felt able to react with such brutality because they have been given the green right by the Tory government to do as they want, with a specific remit to clampdown on protests and demonstrations.

The police were handed extraordinary powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020 and can restrict or prohibit events and gatherings in England and Wales during the pandemic in any place, vehicle, train, vessel or aircraft. The Act was renewed last September by parliament and has increasingly been used to intimidate and ban protests. According to the Network for Police Monitoring (NETPOL), there have been at least nine instances of police using Covid regulations against demonstrators.

Last week, Greater Manchester Police broke up a small protest by National Health Service workers and their supporters in St Peter’s Square, Manchester, citing COVID-19 legislation. The organiser, Karen Reissmann, a mental health worker and a member of the Unison trade union’s National Executive Committee, was fined £10,000.

Whatever temporary recalibrations may be made by the government and police in response to Saturday’s events, the direction of travel towards authoritarian rule will continue with dire implications for democratic rights won over centuries.

Today the government is introducing in Parliament the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. The Bill is aimed at effectively criminalising even peaceful protest. It follows a review of policing protests demanded by Patel following last year’s demonstrations by the environmental group, Extinction Rebellion, and those in opposition to police killings provoked by the murder of George Floyd.

A review commissioned by Patel, to inform the new police Bill, by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) calls for the expansion of stop and search powers for police, as supposedly vital to counter protests deemed “disruptive”, and the “need to develop” covert intelligence gathering methods. The HMICFRS report, ‘An inspection of how effectively the police deal with protests,’ wants static protests to face the same conditions that marches must already adhere to. These include organisers providing advance notice of their plans, enabling police to ban them with the consent of the home secretary.

The Bill allows the home secretary to create laws that define “serious disruption” to communities and organisations, which police can then rely on to impose draconian conditions. It states that it will “Strengthen police powers to tackle non violent protests that have a significant disruptive effect on the public or on access to Parliament.” It allows police to determine whether a demonstration can take place at all and, if so, to impose start and finish times. Maximum noise levels can be imposed on static protests for the first time, as a pretext for a ban.

Left-wing and anti-capitalist sentiment and protests are specifically targeted for repression. The HMICFRS report creates the new category of an “aggravated activity” which is designated as “activity that seeks to bring about political or social change but does so in a way that involves unlawful behaviour or criminality, has a negative impact upon community tensions, or causes an adverse economic impact to businesses.”

“High-level aggravated activism” is described as “activity using tactics to bring about social or political change involving criminality that has a significant impact on UK communities, or where the ideology driving the activity would result in harm to a significant proportion of the population.”



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