

Kenosha: teen charged with murder after two Black Lives Matter protesters killed

Three shot by gunman thought to be linked to a militia as Wisconsin city rocked by further violence

By Peter Beaumont
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Police try to push back demonstrators near the Kenosha county courthouse during a third night of unrest. Photograph: Scott Olson/Getty Images

A 17-year-old has been arrested and charged with murder after two people were killed on Tuesday night when violence erupted in Kenosha, Wisconsin, after white vigilante-type agitators shot at Black Lives Matter protesters.

The suspect has been named in court documents as Kyle Rittenhouse, from Antioch, Illinois, 20 miles south-west of Kenosha, where protesters have been marching on the streets demanding justice and reform since police shot and gravely wounded a young Black father, Jacob Blake, on Sunday. Rittenhouse was taken into custody in Antioch.

Donald Trump on Wednesday announced he was sending federal law enforcement agents to Kenosha, a controversial repeat of recent moves where federal agents were sent to Portland, Oregon, outside normal protocol and against the advice of local elected officials.

“Today I will be sending federal law enforcement and the National Guard to Kenosha, WI to restore LAW and ORDER!” the US president tweeted.

In a subsequent tweet he added: “We will NOT stand for looting, arson, violence, and lawlessness on American streets. My team just got off the phone with Governor Evers who agreed to accept federal assistance (Portland should do the same!)...”

After an 8pm curfew went into operation on Tuesday night, chaos ensued when armed men, some of whom were linked by the authorities to citizen militia groups, appeared on the streets.

Two people were shot dead and another injured when a gunman, also thought to be linked to a militia, opened fire during the protests.

David Beth, the county sheriff, said one of the victims was shot in the head and a second in the chest shortly before midnight on Tuesday.

Police earlier said the FBI was involved in the hunt for a gunman, who had come to Kenosha to confront Black Lives Matter protesters.

Following the shootings a man could be seen on video approaching police vehicles still holding his rifle and with his hands raised as police cars drove past him ignoring shouts from bystanders that he was the shooter.

Beth said people describing themselves as belonging to a militia had been patrolling Kenosha’s streets in recent nights but he did not know if the gunman was involved with such a group. “They’re a militia,” Beth told reporters. “They’re like a vigilante group.”

Kenosha has been rocked by protests since Sunday, when police shot Blake, 29, in the back leaving him paralysed and “fighting for his life”, according to his family and lawyers.

The US Department of Justice said on Wednesday that a federal civil rights investigation had been opened into Blake’s shooting, which is also being investigated by the Wisconsin justice department.

Tuesday’s shootings occurred at around 11.45pm in an area crowded with protesters supporting the Black Lives Matter movement calling for an end to police brutality and systemic racism across America.

Footage posted on social media showed chaotic scenes as gunfire rang out, scattering people in the street. One of the victims, a young shirtless white man with a red bandanna around his head and neck, was seen receiving first aid in a car park after being shot in the head.

Another image showed a man sitting on the ground with his arm almost severed by a gunshot wound.

The third night of protests against the police shooting of Blake, a Black man who was hit at almost point-blank range several times in the back by police, had attracted armed rival protesters who gathered near a petrol station.

Images of the rival group showed heavily armed white men, some wearing body armour. In interviews, some said they had come after a call on social media to “protect” Kenosha.

According to witnesses, the two groups had clashed as the night wore on, as police fired teargas and rubber bullets at demonstrators near Kenosha’s courthouse after declaring a curfew.

The man arrested by the police appears to be the same person pictured repeatedly on social media at key points during the night both before and during the shooting, including interacting with police in a tactical vehicle who said they “appreciated” the vigilantes’ help and gave them bottled water.

Although the sequence of events remains confusing, the Guardian has tried to piece together what happened from video and images posted online showing the run-up to the shooting and its aftermath.

The alleged shooter first appears in footage wearing a baggy light-green T-shirt and dark jeans and a white reversed baseball cap, with other armed people apparently in the vicinity of a site identified as Bert and Rudy’s Auto Service petrol station, where alleged militia members had gathered before the first shots.

In these pictures, the man who appears to be in his late teens or early 20s, carries an assault-style rifle, a distinctive black and orange shoulder bag, wearing what appear to be purple nitrile gloves of the kind used by first aiders and hospital staff.

While what occurs in the intervening period before the first shots is not clear, video taken during the first fatal shooting shows a man with a rifle being pursued by a second man in front of a building with an auto service sign. The pursuer appears to throw something white at him as the two men approach several parked cars.

Several shots ring out, before the figure with the rifle reappears from the far side of the cars and walks round to approach where a young white man without a shirt has fallen with a gunshot wound to the head.

The figure with the gun is identifiable as the young man in the green T-shirt, with the black and orange bag and purple gloves from earlier in the evening

As another man takes off his T-shirt to apply pressure to the wound, the man with the gun turns to leave, talking on a phone.

The next footage takes up events a short time later, showing what appears to be the same man jogging down a street being pursued by others, alerted by the first shots.

As the gunman stumbles and one pursuer takes a flying kick at him, another tries to grab his weapon. The man on the ground then fires at his pursuers at close range with one falling to the ground.

The alleged gunman is finally seen heading north towards several police tactical vehicles, with his arms raised as the tactical vehicles drive by him.

Beth said the investigation into the shooting was focused on the group of men with guns outside the petrol station. Commenting on calls to deputise citizens to help police the protests, Beth said: "I've had people saying: 'Why don't you deputise citizens?' This is why you don't deputise citizens with guns to protect Kenosha."

Journalists and others on the scene in Kenosha said that from the beginning of the protests on Tuesday armed men had been in evidence, amid claims that some had responded to calls on social media to turn out.

There were 34 fires associated with the unrest, with 30 businesses destroyed or damaged along with an unknown number of residences, the Kenosha fire chief, Charles Leipzig, told the Kenosha News.

One man with a handgun, interviewed by the Washington Post, said he had come after a call on Facebook to protect the city. "Ain't nothing being done. We're the only ones," said Joe, 29, who said he was a US marine veteran. "Three thousand of us are armed and ready," he added.