

Kenosha: fears rise that Trump visit could inflame tensions amid protests

Concern grows that president's planned visit could agitate largely peaceful protests after the police shooting of Jacob Blake



Protesters stand on a road during a march against the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on 27 August. Photograph: Kerem Yucel/AFP/Getty Images

Tom Lutz in New York
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Concern was growing on Sunday that a tense but peaceful situation prevailing in Kenosha for the last four days and nights could be inflamed by a planned visit from Donald Trump this week, in the aftermath of the police shooting of Jacob Blake in the city last Sunday.

Blake, a Black 29-year-old father, was shot seven times in the back by a white police officer in the small Wisconsin city, and his family say he is now paralyzed from the waist down.

There was unrest the following night and then largely peaceful marches spiraled into chaos on Tuesday night when white armed agitators appeared on the streets and, after being praised and given water by police despite being out after curfew, appeared to confront protesters and begin shooting.

A white teenager, Kyle Rittenhouse, 17, was seen on video walking away after a man was shot, while others stooped to give the victim medical attention, although he later died.

Then Rittenhouse was seen being chased and, as men tried to stop him, shooting again, then subsequently walking through police lines with an assault rifle around his neck and his hands up, without being apprehended.

He turned himself in in Antioch, Illinois, the following day and has been charged with intentional homicide after the alleged shooting death of two white men , and other charges relating to the assault rifle he was carrying, and another shooting where a man's arm was severely injured. Since Tuesday night, marches and rallies in Kenosha have been calm.

On Saturday, Blake's family spoke at an impassioned, peaceful rally in Kenosha. "We're not going to stop," Blake's father, Jacob Sr, told the crowd. "We're still suffering because there are two justice systems. There's one for that white boy [Rittenhouse] that walked down the street and killed two people and blew another man's arm off. Then there's one for my son."

He was also critical of the police. "What gave them the right to think that my son was an animal?" he said.

The US president announced on Saturday a plan to visit Kenosha on Tuesday.



Jacob Blake's father speaks to crowd gathered at Civic Center Park, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on Sunday. Photograph: Jim Vondruska/Reuters

California Democratic congresswoman Karen Bass said on Sunday that she thought the violence that erupted in Kenosha on Tuesday night was "absolutely horrible", following the police shooting, which was also caught on video.

She said of Rittenhouse: "The idea that we would see that young man with a rifle walking towards the police and they do nothing and he has killed two people, and the

head of law enforcement the following day seemed to blame [the deaths] on people being out after curfew ... 90% of protests [in Kenosha] have been peaceful,” she said. The federal government has opened a civil rights investigation into the shooting and, after almost five days of silence, Trump said on Friday that the image of Blake being shot by police “was not a good sight”.

But Bass said of Trump’s plan to travel to Kenosha: “I think this visit has one purpose and one purpose only and that’s to agitate things.”

Trump has been increasingly positioning himself in terms of an election campaign centered on cracking down on unrest, even as he appeared to egg on Trump supporters who drove in a huge procession into Portland, Oregon, on Saturday night and shot paintballs and pepper spray at protesters, buy retweeting video of the incident.

And he tweeted simply “Law and order” on Sunday morning.

In fact, Bass told CNN she thinks “he is going to do everything to disrupt law and order” in order to try to win re-election by sowing division and fear.

The president has been critical of the wave of protests against police brutality and systemic racism that have swept the US since the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May.

Democratic presidential and vice-presidential candidates Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have talked extensively with the family of Jacob Blake and strongly condemned the police shooting.

Miles Taylor, former chief of staff to Kirstjen Nielsen, then homeland security secretary, and now adviser to an anti-Trump group, the Republican Political Alliance for Integrity and Reform (Repair), said that while presidential visits can “cool down the rhetoric”, he was concerned.



Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back by a white police officer in the small Wisconsin city, and his family say he is now paralyzed from the waist down. Photograph: Jim Vondruska/Reuters
 “My problem is that Donald Trump goes to these places to politicize things...if you go to deliver a unifying message, yes, but I’m skeptical,” he said.

It is unclear whether Trump plans to meet with Blake or his family.

Kenosha is the latest US city where protests against racism and excessive use of force by police are occurring. In addition to police reforms, the mostly white midwestern community needs to address the fundamental disadvantages Black people face in Kenosha, according to Verona King, a former president of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter.

While about 13% of whites live in poverty in Kenosha, more than a third of Black residents are impoverished. Kenosha also lacks racial equality in housing, health care, education and within the justice system, King said.

“We want to address the systemic racism that is running rampant in all of these areas,” she said.

While most of the protests in Kenosha have been peaceful, there was some initial damage to property and businesses in the city.

“We are not the last community that this will happen to,” one resident, Vickie Kwasny, said as she looked at dozens of torched cars in a parking lot near her home. “I hope we can heal. We have a lot of cleaning up to do.”

Chenesse Brown, a 31-year-old teacher, handed out water and snacks as she held her two-month old godson during a march on Saturday.

“This morning ... everything caught up to me and I just sat on the foot of my bed and cried. Because this is not the Kenosha that we know,” she said. “It’s surreal, overwhelming and saddening, but then I come out and see this and it reminds that ... we have our faith and our hope.”