



Statement

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By International Crisis Group

To Calm Turmoil, U.S. Leaders Must Stop Courting Conflict

At May's end, the police killing of George Floyd sent a wave of unrest rolling through U.S. cities. Rather than easing tensions, the Trump administration has used incendiary rhetoric, called military units to Washington and threatened to send them elsewhere. Cooler heads must prevail.

For more than a week, the world has watched as the United States' deepest wounds, inflicted by the unhealed legacy of slavery and rubbed raw by sustained racial injustice, erupted into public rage and violence. The police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed African American man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota touched off a wave of protest that reached virtually every corner of the country, with riots and looting in many major cities. The crisis put the nation's political divides on full display. In some states and cities, at least some of the time, local leaders and security officials sought to reduce tensions through a combination of empathy and firmness. In many other instances, however, local police moved to disperse demonstrations with excessive force. In Washington, the nation's political and security leaders appeared to egg on a heavy-handed response, comparing U.S. cities to a

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“battlespace” and threatening military action if local authorities did not quell the unrest. Over the long term, the nation will need to take steps to end the police's brutality and militarization as well as structural racial inequality if it wants to avoid similar future crises. At present, however, what the country's leadership most needs to do is insist that those culpable for Floyd's killing are brought to justice, stand in support of those local officials and community leaders who are calling for calm and reform, abandon its martial rhetoric and stop making the situation worse.

The trouble started early on 25 May, Memorial Day, a holiday treated as the unofficial beginning of summer across the United States. Floyd, a 46-year-old who had preached non-violence on social media, was apprehended by police outside a convenience store in Minneapolis. The store clerks said Floyd had purchased cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill. Surveillance cameras and onlooker cell phones captured what happened next. After a brief struggle, the police subdued and pinned the unarmed Floyd to the ground, with an officer's knee buried in his neck for nearly nine minutes – even after he complained, at least sixteen times, that he could not breathe, and even after he lost consciousness. Later that day, a local



Demonstrators gather along the fence surrounding Lafayette Park outside the White House as protests continue over the death in police custody of George Floyd, in Washington, U.S. on 2 June 2020. REUTERS/Jim Bourg

hospital pronounced him dead. In the coming days, as images of Floyd's killing went viral, parts of Minneapolis exploded, and the outrage spread.

Some observers expressed shock at the force of the reaction in Minneapolis, which saw a furious crowd burn a police precinct house to the ground. But that was just the beginning. Marchers surged into the streets in 140 cities across the country, with gatherings recorded in all 50 states. They included mainly peaceful protesters, but in some places also rioters with more violent designs and looters. In some cities, such as parts of New York, the largely peaceful demonstrations that filled the streets during the day were replaced by scenes of looting and destruction after nightfall. Crowds defaced CNN's corporate headquarters in Atlanta, and smashed storefronts on posh shopping streets in Chicago, New York and Washington.

There were also confrontations between protesters and police. On 30 May, protesters in the nation's capital pushed up against police lines in Lafayette Park in front of the White House. Whether for good reason or not, the Secret Service was sufficiently rattled at one point that evening that agents ushered President Donald J. Trump to an underground bunker. Police responses varied widely around the country – with some forces showing discipline and restraint (one Michigan sheriff dropped his protective gear and walked alongside the marchers) and others using indefensibly heavy force against protesters and journalists.

The nation's fractured politics played out in the words of its civic leaders. Some, like Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms and rapper Killer Mike, struck a balance – both insisting on reforms to address the deep pain and injustice borne by the African American community

and urging protesters to be peaceful. Others, particularly conservative leaders like President Trump and Attorney General William Barr, urged local police to be “much tougher” and emphasised the role of radical left-wing groups and anarchists in fomenting the unrest. They singled out Antifa (a phrase that has become shorthand for an amorphous grouping of “anti-fascist” activists), which Trump threatened to designate as a terrorist organisation, even though U.S. law affords him no such power.

But beyond the splintering of leader-level discourse, perhaps the most sobering political development as the protests reached the one-week mark was a growing inclination among some prominent elected and security officials to frame the civil unrest in the language of armed conflict. On 1 June alone, Congressman Matt Gaetz called the rioters “terrorists” and urged that they be “hunted down like ... in the Middle East”; Senator Tom Cotton tweeted that there should be “no quarter for insurrectionists, anarchists, rioters and looters”; and Secretary of Defense Mike Esper urged state governors to “dominate the battlespace” in their cities. Esper’s characterisation (which he later walked back) drew sharp rebukes from some retired military brass. Retired General Martin Dempsey, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, tweeted, “America is not a battleground. Our fellow citizens are not the enemy”.

It was hardly clear, however, that administration officials intend to heed this caution. On the evening of 1 June, President Trump addressed the nation from the White House Rose Garden, threatening to dispatch “thousands and thousands of heavily armed soldiers and military personnel” to keep the peace in U.S. cities, intimating that he might even do so over the objection of state officials whom he had earlier in the day chided for being “weak”. As a matter of law and precedent, he might be able to do so. Some legal scholars say far-reaching authorities (including the 1807 Insurrection Act) may, under certain circumstances, permit the president to commandeer national guard troops – who normally answer to state

governors – and deploy both them and active-duty military personnel to quell civil unrest.

Shortly after Trump’s Rose Garden remarks, security forces fired smoke canisters and rubber bullets to break up a crowd of peaceful protesters and allow the president to walk through Lafayette Park with Secretary Esper and General Mark A. Milley, the current Joint Chiefs chairman, to pose with a bible in front of the venerable St. John’s Episcopal Church, whose basement had been set afire in earlier rioting. Later in the evening, General Milley, whom the president had announced would be “in charge” of managing the crisis, was photographed in combat uniform, assessing the military presence that had been mustered to patrol the streets of downtown Washington. On 2 June, the White House announced that about 1,600 additional troops, including an active-duty army quick-reaction force and military police, would be deployed to the capital region.

International reactions were swift and strong. They ranged from large anti-racist demonstrations in Sydney, Paris and elsewhere to the painting of a mural of George Floyd in Syria’s rebel-held Idlib. The UN Secretary-General weighed in, while the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, issued a powerful statement denouncing this “latest in a long line of killings of unarmed African Americans”, calling on U.S. authorities to “take serious action to stop such killings, and to ensure justice is done when they do occur” and pointing to the “role that entrenched and pervasive racial discrimination plays in such deaths”. Close U.S. allies bemoaned Trump’s “pouring [of] oil into the fire” and condemned Floyd’s killing as an “abuse of power”, while adversaries were quick to make hay of the situation to point to U.S. hypocrisy. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, drew parallels between Floyd’s treatment at the hands of police and U.S. actions abroad, saying, “The crime committed against this black man is the same thing the U.S. government has been doing against all the world”. The result, inevitably, will be to further undermine U.S. global standing and

credibility, particularly when it comes to condemning repression or brutality perpetrated by other governments.

Whatever happens next, U.S. policymakers should not let chaos or spectacle obscure the origins of the week's events. George Floyd's killing sparked a firestorm of protest and violence in part because it met such an abundance of dry tinder. The United States has never adequately come to terms with the horrific legacy of two and a half centuries of chattel slavery. Nor has it healed or conquered the institutionalised violence and racism toward African Americans that followed their emancipation in the 1860s. There are still millions of Americans who grew up under the Jim Crow system of segregation underwritten by the Supreme Court's infamous 1896 ruling (since overturned) that racially separate but ostensibly equal facilities are constitutionally permitted. The Jim Crow period was a time when lynchings – in which white mobs killed black people expressly to terrorise other blacks – were common. African Americans born after Jim Crow was dismantled during the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s have nevertheless lived with glaring structural inequalities: unequal access to education, employment, housing, health care, nutrition and protection under the law.

Against this backdrop, police brutality toward black men and women has been both a chronic problem and a recurrent source of instability in U.S. cities. In April and May 1992, the failure to convict four Los Angeles police officers being tried for the brutal beating of Rodney King launched six days of violence that killed 60 people. In August 2014, the killing of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri police kicked off ten days of unrest, which saw protesters squaring off against police clad in military-grade equipment obtained through a Pentagon-sponsored program. In April 2015, the death

of Freddie Gray from traumatic injuries he suffered while being transported in a police van kicked off two weeks of protests and violence in Baltimore, Maryland.

In the present context, George Floyd's killing came when the memory of other killings was still fresh. Just weeks before Floyd's killing, a video tape surfaced showing an African American man, Ahmaud Arbery, being hunted down and killed by two white men while jogging through a suburban neighborhood in southern Georgia. In mid-March, police acting on a faulty arrest warrant in Louisville, Kentucky broke down the door of Breonna Taylor, an African American emergency medic. In the melee that ensued, they shot her eight times and killed her in her own home. To date, no one has been charged in her murder.

Also fresh were memories of forms of protest that sought to call attention to police violence against African Americans without taking to the streets. Some commentators have noted how political leaders heaped scorn on National Football League player Colin Kaepernick's efforts to do this by kneeling during the national anthem. In 2017, Vice President Mike Pence conspicuously walked out of an NFL game when Kaepernick and a few other players knelt during the anthem. Trump later said athletes who express this type of dissent "maybe shouldn't be in the country".

But the issue of police violence cannot be so easily shunted aside. Indeed, what the current protests show is that in the absence of fundamental reform, it will remain a source of division and instability for the United States. The more that the U.S. government can do to embrace some of the ideas that have been put forward in this vein – whether forming a national task force to draft legislation that would increase police accountability, or taking steps to constrain how and when police can use

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force and to make it easier to fire those who do not abide, or reinvigorating the Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division – the more reason protesters will have to believe that authorities are finally taking their grievances seriously. Of particular immediate importance will be to show that authorities are taking all responsible steps to ensure that justice is done in the case of George Floyd. The Minnesota attorney general’s decision on 3 June to indict all four officers involved in Floyd’s death, upgrading the charge against the lead officer to second-degree murder, was a good start.

Perhaps of greatest urgency, the country’s leaders need to stop making the situation worse. For the past quarter-century, Crisis Group has analysed conflicts and crises around the globe, learning some lessons along the way about the do’s and don’ts of crisis resolution. Unfortunately, the current leadership in Washington seems to be picking far more from the “don’ts” list – taking actions and making statements that ought to be avoided if the goal is to tamp down tensions rather than exacerbate them. The Trump administration and its allies in Congress should dispense with incendiary, panicky rhetoric that suggests the U.S. is in armed conflict with its own people, or that some political faction is the enemy, lest security forces feel encouraged or emboldened to target them as combatants. Rather than demonise reporters, who have in several instances been attacked and arrested by the police they are helping hold to account, political leaders should underscore that a vigorous press is a pillar of U.S. democracy and stability. While national authorities should support firm and responsible policing where necessary to end the nightly looting that continues in some locations, they should also set an example for local police by apologising for what occurred outside the White

House on 1 June and making clear that no security force should ever use these tactics against peaceful protesters.

To be sure, a number of local leaders and some security officials have set the right kind of example. But the benefit of this leadership could be lost if, at the other end of the spectrum, President Trump – perhaps playing to what he thinks will be his political advantage as the 2020 election nears – continues to send a message of anger, intolerance and frustration, and fails to announce any measure to demonstrate a meaningful commitment to at least some of the reforms that are long overdue. Perhaps worst of all would be if he escalates tensions by invoking the Insurrection Act and carrying through with his sweeping threats to deploy the U.S. military – a move that even Secretary Esper has now publicly discouraged. That should be reserved for only the most extraordinary circumstances. In a powerful statement on 3 June, former Secretary of Defense General James Mattis lambasted Trump for “militarizing our response” to the week’s unrest and setting up “a conflict – a false conflict – between the military and civilian society”. Since assuming office in 2017, Trump has made much of his desire to pull the U.S. back from overseas wars. He should take great pains not to act like he wants one at home.