



INFLAMED TENSIONS

“In darkness we are the same color, Black, but fire lights the way of the unheard who shine brighter than injustice placed before them.”

East Harlem social activist Karen Aromi

NEW SLAVE PHOTOGRAPHY/INSTAGRAM

Bright flames illuminate street protesters' heated emotions Tuesday night, June 2, in Harlem, New York, as peaceful rallies across city are engulfed by violence.

BY CARNELL WHITE
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HARLEM, N.Y. – Parts of New York’s Brooklyn and The Bronx boroughs burned Tuesday night as demonstrations turned from peaceful to restless and from civil to looting, awakening “the city that never sleeps.”

Large, visibly flustered and vocal crowds reacting to the unlawful death of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, gathered across New York City June 2 to vent and protest the injustice in the midst of COVID-19, according to city officials.

With fresh social media images going viral and media coverage of Floyd’s arrest, detainment and ultimate demise, uproar sparked across the nation. What started out as hundreds of people quickly turned into thousands as people came together to have their voices heard in New York City streets.

“The city that never sleeps has been divided in the last three months (because of the coronavirus pandemic),” said social media influencer Lissette Hughes. “In May of 2020 it (Floyd’s death) was given a reason to bring life back to the city of New York.”

According to Minneapolis officials and media reports, Floyd was arrested after a Minneapolis food store employee called police, alleging Floyd had passed on a counterfeit bill for a purchase. He died in police custody, while forcibly being

held down for nearly nine minutes under a knee-hold by then-officer Derek Chauvin, while three other officers looked on and did nothing to stop him.

The widely-publicized act videotaped by onlookers with cellphones triggered protests in response to the alleged racially-sensitive act from demographically and ethnically diverse communities internationally, in attempts to remind the world that black people matter, and that systemic racism and police brutality have not banished.

Chauvin and the three officers have since been arrested and charged with second- and third- degree murder, respectively.

Harlem resident Mary White, describing her mood, the emotional toll and the atmosphere in the city, said that “New York City has had to handle a lot the past several months because of COVID-19, and now the unlawful acts of the Minneapolis Police Department have pushed the state’s madness over the top.”

The deadly show of force unearthed past reactions and shame of New York’s own grapple with the death of Eric Garner of Staten Island, New York. He died six years earlier in the hands of a plain-clothed NYPD officer who forcibly put him in a choke-hold on July 17, 2014, as he cried out, “I can’t breathe.”

Garner’s last words, “I Can’t Breathe,” carry on to this day and have become the rallying cry for a protest movement

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that has resurfaced in 2020 with the same meaning, but from a different voice—George Floyd of Minnesota.

“A fight together against those in ‘blue’ (New York Police Department) is a fight we will win and be heard,” posted protester and activist Lexis White alongside her Instagram video. “This is much bigger than us; it’s for those we lost and those who came before us.”

Twenty-year-old Michael Darden of Harlem said that black people have tried peaceful protest and social media togetherness, but after this latest public display of wrongful death by police, “enough was enough.”

“I feel helpless, not in control of my own future,” Darden said. “For years, black people have been looking for social equality, but there’s been no change. I wake up as a threat every day and think to myself how can the world change for the better as I become better.”

For more than a week, tens of thousands of outraged people have packed into cities globally staging protests—some peaceful and some violent—which were physically marred by countless arrests, looting, and direct confrontations with police.

“We are in a fight against people with blue costumes who make their own rules and don’t abide by them,” Darden chanted. “Together we stand strong, BLACK LIVES MATTER!”

A longtime NYPD officer (who chose to remain anonymous) said that his perception of what is occurring in NYC daily is disheartening, referring to the ill-representation of the NYPD by some officers serving during these troubled times.



MITCHELL WATSON PHOTOGRAPHER/ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
Instagram image captures Black Lives Matter message by young frontline activists in New York City last week.

The recently retired officer explained that those officers are not a reflection of the entire department who has sworn to protect neighborhoods throughout the city, but they do lack respect for the people who they protect.

“It sucks that the media only catches the bad things,” he said, “because there are good deeds that officers like me and my partners have done over the years that go unnoticed.”

But Khari Whilmore, a third-year accounting student, described the physical and emotional toll and response on the city as gripping.

“Cities are burning, not just with fires, but with hatred and built-up anger,” Whilmore said. “We are scared for our lives, and we are tired of running and being threats with targets on our backs.”

“It’s time for them to hear us and feel the pressure we face every day, whether they like it or not.”

James Mitchell, one of the protesters marching in the Tuesday rally throughout the city, remarked that in the midst of it all, “being black in America isn’t easy.”

“Having to live your life in hopes of the injustice you may face being recorded and having constant anxiety of doing the wrong thing in the mind of the white oppressor isn’t how life should be lived,” Mitchell said in one of his Instagram posts about his current state of living.

Karen Aromi, an East Harlem social activist and the mother of two school-aged children, said, “In darkness we are the same color, black, but fire lights the way of the unheard who shine brighter than injustice placed before them.

“We must fight until we all see the light of progression.”



INSTAGRAM
James Mitchell's Instagram post compares 1960s' issues to those facing America today.

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