

UK riots: Birmingham's Muslims and Sikhs debate response to tragedy

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Emotions run high at candlelit vigil for three men killed in riots as Asian communities weigh up how to react.

When the prime minister, David Cameron, said on Wednesday the riots had brought out "some of the best of Britain", he could not have known how fitting that description would be of events on a petrol station forecourt in the suburb of Birmingham 12 hours later.

Spilling out in the road beside the Jet garage, where three Asian men were killed the previous night, around 300 Muslim and Sikh men gathered to debate how they should respond to the tragedy.

There were no politicians in sight – no official community spokespeople or religious leaders. These were local men, struggling to know how to manage their grief and anger.

Candles marked the spot where Haroon Jahan, 21, and brothers Shazad Ali, 30 and Abdul Musavir, 31, had been killed in the early hours of Wednesday.

The three were part of a group of around 80 guarding the petrol station, on Dudley Road in Winson Green, when they were victims of a hit-and-run. A murder inquiry has been launched, and a 32-year-old man is being questioned.

After prayers and a silent vigil, men took turns to express their views. There had been fears that the meeting, held after last prayer of the day – Isha'a – would be a flashpoint, sparking a further round of rioting and looting.

It was clear from snatches of conversation that there were some in the crowd – a minority – who wanted to reap revenge on the black community, whom they held responsible for the deaths. They did not prevail.

It is hard to explain how the men gathered in the dark reached the conclusion they did. There was no leader; the forum was open for people to speak and disagree.

The consensus among most – after half an hour – was that a planned march should not take place, in part because it would be disrespectful to the families of those who died. Not everyone agreed – and it was impossible to know whether dissenters would break away later in the night and, in breach of the general will, seek retaliation.

However community relations in Birmingham play out in the days and weeks to come, the meeting at Dudley Road will serve as evidence of a determination among many not to allow the violence to spiral.

Standing on the wall of the forecourt, one Sikh man, Harpreet Singh, 28, began by imploring others

not to take to the streets. He said they had gathered to pay their respects to the deceased and prove they were united. He announced the families of the dead men did not want them to march on the city centre, as had previously been planned.

"We need to tell the media we will not tolerate the tyranny, but we will not react either. We are capable, but we will not do it," he said. Singh concluded there were two possible outcomes - either they would protest, and the media would label them "extremists", or they would act "nobly" and be perceived as a community united.

He added: "You decide. I will stand with you all the way. I speak to you on behalf of all the Sikhs who were guarding the gurdwaras and mosques yesterday."

Some in the crowd, both Muslim and Sikhs, agreed. Others did not, insisting they had come to protest.

"I say peacefully march man," one man shouted. Another said: "Okay, I'm here to do a march, you get me? Let's do a march - but keep it peaceful," said one man, in his 20s.

"Yeah, but it won't stay peaceful," interjected someone else. "I know my brothers, it won't stay peaceful."

Another voice from the crowd added: "Whoever makes trouble, man, we are going to have to deal with them ourselves. No matter who you are, no matter which area you're from, you are going to get beaten by our elders."

There were some chants of "march, march, march". There was another shout of "not today, not today," followed by "who wants a peaceful march - hands up?". A sizeable number of hands were raised. Many, it seemed, had come expecting a demonstration.

An hour before the debate started, the atmosphere had been highly charged, as groups gathered for silent prayers for the dead men. The crowd consisted mostly of young men, many of whom had hoods pulled over their heads. A small number - five or six - had scarves concealing most of their faces. There were older men too, and some community elders.

Police kept a low profile at the edge of the gathering. A few held their hats under their arms as prayers were said.

Speaking before the debate about whether to protest began, Shaheen Kayani, 46, a cab driver from nearby Hodge Hill, said the Muslim community was pulling together to prevent trouble.

"Everybody says to their sons: please don't start another riot. People don't want trouble any more. I just say we want peace, peace, peace." Some of the younger contingent sniggered as he spoke. They were the same teenagers quietly shaking their heads later, listening on from the fringe of the meeting as the tide of opinion turned against street protest.

Some of them urged a reaction. "They've killed them for free, bro," said one man. Others made racist comments about the looters and suspected murderer. But when a man pointed his finger in the air, shouting: "We are going to protest to let them now how we feel", he was shouted down.

The crowd had been building, and was halting the traffic. Police gathered nearer to shepherd people off the road.

There appeared to be agreement that any protest should take place on Friday, after prayers.

One man who had initially been agitating to take to the streets announced he had had changed his stance.

"I've changed my mind, bro. The way I see, the brothers we can't control." Smaller discussions broke out in the crowd.

After more debate, one man stepped forward and shouted with a force that lifted his voice above the murmurs.

"Make sure you're not marching in the name of the three brothers that died. Because if you're gonna march ... in their name, and you're rioting, it is a disgrace."

There were grunts of approval. A number of people said they would go home. A handful of the masked youths walked away. Those who remained stood in near silence, heads bowed as they listened to Sikh and Muslim prayers.

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P.S.

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