

Thousands of National Guard Troops Occupy Baltimore, Maryland

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The city of Baltimore remains under a siege by 2,000 National Guard troops and another 1,000 state and local cops assembled from the city and surrounding areas. Although the head of Maryland's National Guard claimed, "This is not martial law," the city, just 40 miles from the nation's capital, is occupied by military vehicles, helicopters and heavily armed troops.

Maryland's Republican governor and the city's Democratic mayor used isolated incidents of looting Monday night to declare a state of emergency and impose a weeklong 10 pm - 5 am curfew. The repressive measures are aimed at silencing protests that were sparked by the cover-up of the police murder of 25-year-old Freddie Gray.

Using loudspeakers on squad cars, tactical vehicles and helicopters, and direct calls to every landline in the city, the police told residents Tuesday night they would enforce the curfew and arrest violators. As the deadline approached, clergymen and local Democratic Party politicians, including Congressman Elijah Cummings, implored residents to go home.

Nevertheless, thousands defied the anti-democratic police threats as the curfew went into effect. By 10:15 pm, the police began moving in, using a so-called "step and drag" maneuver and banging their shields with batons to intimidate protesters. News reporters were also told they would be arrested if they recorded the events. At 10:23 police began throwing flash bang grenades, which were promptly thrown back. The cops then fired pepper bullets, filled with repellents, to choke protesters and irritate their eyes. By midnight the police had arrested 10 people, mainly for breaching the 10 p.m., curfew.

Since clashes in neighborhoods started Monday afternoon, more than 300 protesters have been arrested. One arrest on Tuesday night took place as a National Guard humvee blocked the view of cameras while police violently tackled a protester to the ground. Large numbers of heavily armored vehicles, including MRAPs (Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles), returning from Afghanistan and other war zones, moved in a show of force to disperse remaining crowds.

Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, who claimed earlier that the dispatch of troops was a "last resort," acknowledged Tuesday that he had opened an emergency command center and prepared an executive order to deploy troops last Saturday, the same day as a peaceful march of thousands of protesters.

Hogan boasted that this allowed him to deploy troops three hours after Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake requested them, far faster than the normal eight hours it would

generally take. The “troops would remain as long as necessary,” the governor said, and would be used to “clear the streets” because authorities “had the obligation to protect life.”

Mayor Rawlings-Blake—an African American woman considered a rising star in the national Democratic Party—thanked the governor for dispatching the troops, adding that they would subdue “pockets of individuals running around causing damage.”

At a press conference Monday night, Rawlings-Blake could not restrain her hatred and fear of the thousands of dispossessed youth. “Too many people have spent generations building up the city for it to be destroyed by thugs who are trying to tear down what so many fought for. They are tearing down businesses, destroying property.”

Rawlings-Blake is a representative of affluent layers of African Americans who have largely run the corporate and political establishment in Baltimore for decades and have prospered while the vast majority of workers and youth have suffered decades of deindustrialization, budget cuts and ever greater state repression.

After meeting Tuesday with the millionaire preacher and fellow Democratic Party operative Al Sharpton, the mayor said that police would hand over the results of their internal investigation to the state’s attorney general Friday. She insisted, however, that no decision on charges would be made Friday, and that “we have to respect the process of the investigation.”

Meanwhile authorities continue to conceal the identity of the cops who broke Freddie Gray’s neck and severed 80 percent of spine for the crime of making eye contact and allegedly running from police.

Rioting, the mayor cynically claimed Tuesday, “diverts resources from a community that can least afford to lose them.” In fact, like every other big city Democratic mayor, Rawlings-Blake is overseeing savage cuts to city services. Some 25,000 residents are threatened with water shutoffs as part of plans to privatize the public water system. Meanwhile resources are poured into improving the “business climate” and to gentrifying the downtown area.

Eighty-four percent of the district’s 85,000 school children qualify for free or reduced price lunches because they come from low-income families. The CEO of the Baltimore Schools, Gregory Thornton, is currently eliminating hundreds of teaching and staff positions and making other cuts totaling \$63 million to lower the district’s \$108 million budget deficit.

Freddie Gray’s neighborhood of Sandtown was recently described by the *Baltimore Sun* as “a neighborhood where generations of crushing poverty and the war on drugs combine to rob countless young people like [Freddie Gray] of meaningful opportunities.”

President Obama, who has been in close contact with Maryland and Baltimore authorities, echoed the venom directed at the city’s youth. In a scripted answer to a question about Baltimore during a White House press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Obama said, “There is no excuse for the kind of violence we saw yesterday...the individuals using crowbars to loot are not protesting or making a statement, they are stealing...It is entirely appropriate that the mayor and governor who I spoke to work to stop that senseless violence and destruction.”

The president feigned concern over the desperate conditions facing young people in

Baltimore and cities around the country—conditions that his policies have only worsened. Obama promised to work with the Republicans on “school reform, some investment infrastructure and trying to attract new businesses.”

Throughout the day, the national news networks sought to undermine sympathy for youth, whose elemental eruption against police violence and social inequality took such a form precisely because of the official indifference and repression by both big business parties.

Efforts to find ordinary residents—those who are not clergy, businessmen or politicians—to denounce the protests largely failed. One youth approached by CNN said,

“There are too many homeless people, too many abandoned houses. Now we are getting the attention we need. There should not be a liquor store on every corner. People are getting fed up. It is about to be the last straw. People are getting tired. When will justice come? If an officer was killed, the person would have been arrested long ago.”

Throughout the day the police chief and the news media praised a Baltimore mother who hit her child and forcefully pulled him away for anti-police protests. “I wish I had more parents who took charge of their kids tonight,” Chief Anthony Batts said.

After the video was widely circulated, Toya Graham, a single mother of six told CBS Evening News, “That’s my only son and at the end of the day I don’t want him to be Freddie Gray.”

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