Wednesday, Aug. 6, 2024 / Riots in the UK

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <Rowing Onward>

NOEL KING (host): The U-K is getting ready for another night of unrest. Protests are planned for several towns and cities this evening. And the reality is: for about a WEEK these PROTESTS have in some places descended into RIOTs. Here’s Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

*<CLIP> BRITISH PRIME MINISTER KEIR STARMER: We’ve seen Muslim communities targeted, attacks on mosques, other minority communities singled out, Nazi salutes in the street, attacks on the police. Wanton violence alongside racist rhetoric. So no, I won’t shy away from calling it what it is: far-right thuggery.*

NOEL: Meanwhile, the BBC and others just today reported the existence of a “hit-list” that’s spreading on social media, containing the names of immigration lawyers, who say the police have told them to board up their offices and work from home.

What is going on across the pond? Coming up next on *Today, Explained*.

SCORING OUT

[THEME]

*<CLIP> PATRICK BOYD: This is Today, Explained.*

ROBYN VINTER (*The Guardian* correspondent): I'm Robyn Vinter, I'm north of England correspondent at *The Guardian*. And I'm based in Leeds, in the north of England.

NOEL: So the stage for what's unfolded over the last week in the UK was set in a town called Southport. What’s Southport like?

ROBYN: It’s usually a very kind of sweet seaside town, so it's right on the northwest coast of England, slightly north of Liverpool – a lot of people will have heard of Liverpool – probably one of the most friendly towns in, in England actually. Everybody usually gets on very well. It's, it's fairly quiet. You know, people might say there's not a lot going on there, normally, but it's a very nice place to live.

NOEL: So about a week ago, Southport was the scene of an attack. What happened?

ROBYN: Well, the first we heard was that there'd been a stabbing.

SCORING <Gentle Push – BMC>

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS, SOUTHPORT RESIDENT: My neighbor knocked and said that she'd seen there was something on the news, and she knew that my little girl goes to nursery very close by. So I rang the nursery straight away and they've been put into lockdown by the police. <fade down>*

ROBYN: When the details came out, it turned out three little girls had been stabbed.

*<CLIP> TALK TV: A knifeman entered their Taylor Swift-themed dance class on Hart Street in Southport, Merseyside, just before midday. Five children were left in a critical condition after the incident.*

ROBYN: Bebe King, who was aged six, Elsie Dot Stancombe who was seven, and Alice DaSilva Aguiar, who was nine.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS, SOUTHPORT RESIDENT: I've got a daughter of my own and it’s just made me…I don't know what to say. I’m still upset <<crying>>*

*REPORTER: You’re okay.*

*SOUTHPORT RESIDENT: Poor children.*

ROBYN: So in total it was 11 children and two adults who were stabbed. And some of them, you know, with quite serious injuries in, in what was described as a ferocious attack.

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ROBYN: You know, with these kind of situations, often, the perpetrator is caught quite early on. And in this case, he was caught at the scene.

*<CLIP> MERSEYSIDE CHIEF CONSTABLE SERENA KENNEDY: A 17 year old male from Banks in Lancashire who is originally from Cardiff has been arrested on suspicion of murder and attempted murder and is being taken to a police station where he will be interviewed by detectives. <fade under>*

ROBYN: So he was British born, um, and so he'd been arrested immediately on suspicion of murder and attempted murder. But the motive was unclear. And initially he hadn't been named. As he was 17, in the UK, there are reporting restrictions on naming, children involved in, you know, serious incidents and court cases.

*<CLIP> LBC RADIO, NICK FERRARI: The laws that quite rightly govern broadcast organizations such as LBC, SkyNews and the BBC… make sure that you DON’T put out erroneous facts that could lead to all sorts of problems.*

ROBYN: The reporting restrictions that were in place that prevented naming or identifying the 17 year old –  who then was, was later named by a judge as Axel Rudakubana – In the in that kind of gap of 3 or 4 days, a lot of online misinformation had circulated about who had perpetrated the crime, with lots of people saying online that it was a, a Muslim and that, you know, there was a kind of a made -up name that went around online of this Muslim immigrant that had done this crime.

*<CLIP> TIMES RADIO: Last night, the information came up around this supposed teenager called Ali Al-Shakati…we now know that the only place posting this is not a news outlet, it has no named journalists, it’s not what it claims to be. It’s apparently run by some random Russian lads, and they’ve got no legal recourse to be using someone's name.*

ROBYN: And there's been, quite similar to a lot of European countries and the same as the US, there has been kind of underlying anti-immigrant sentiment in the UK for quite some time. That seems to have gotten worse. We've got a few high-profile politicians that have made very strong anti-immigration comments. There's a guy called Nigel Farage who's just been elected as an MP in the UK.

*<CLIP> MP NIGEL FARAGE: The police say it’s a non-terror incident… I just wonder whether the truth is being withheld from us. I don't know the answer to that but I think it is a fair and legitimate question. What I do know is something is going horribly wrong in our once-beautiful country.*

ROBYN: And so that kind of anti-immigration sentiment is kind of built. And then what happened then, the following night, was a kind of outpouring as people took to the streets and rioted in Southport.

*<CLIP> ITV NEWS: We don’t know where they streamed in from, but they’re believed to be supporters of the English Defense League <crowd noise> Just before 8:00 they met outside a mosque in the town where a few hundred people threw bricks and fireworks at the windows. The suspect behind yesterday's attack isn’t known to be Muslim, but a connection was drawn nonetheless.*

ROBYN: You know, it was adequately defended, I would say, by, by locals and by the police, who arrived and kind of started to contain the violence. But in the meantime, you know, they had managed to do quite a lot of damage and that was kind of damage that then, in the morning, the kind of ordinary citizens of Southport came out and, and repaired and restored and, and it was certainly… The feeling the next morning was certainly that people in Southport don't condone the violence. And they, you know, that is not what Southport is.

NOEL: But then unfortunately, the unrest spread.

ROBYN: That's right. Yeah. This had happened on the Tuesday night. And by the Friday, there was a list of places where demonstrations were going to be held, or, you know, they were described as protests. So fliers were going around social media that said, ‘A protest is going to be held outside this mosque.’ And then we saw a kind of large-scale pockets of far-right riots, a lot of violence in a lot of towns and cities across the UK.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS: Another fire, another night of chaos this time in Sunderland a police station attacked. The property next to it, set alight.*

ROBYN: There was a hotel that was housing asylum seekers that had come to the UK that had been the scene of protests before, and that was kind of on the list of places where a protest was going to be held. And that one got out of hand very quickly. It was under-policed, partly because the police were stretched because there'd been another one organized in a city nearby and they perhaps underestimated how many people would attend early on. And Rotherham isn't, isn't a place like Liverpool, where there's a large number of anti-fascists and a large number of people who will go there and, and, and stand up to these people. Although there were counter-protesters there, you know, they were immediately cattled by the group of far right and had racist abuse shouted at them, and the police had to take them a mile away to safety. In total, there were about 750 rioters. They were kind of physically attacking police, you know, physically smashing windows, burning things, you know, the real – as you'd imagine what a rioter looks like – the real kind of hardcore rioters.

SCORING <Kos Kar, APM>

ROBYN: They managed to set fire briefly to the hotel with the asylum seekers inside. There were about 240 asylum seekers inside. Which was obviously terrifying. You know, they were… the windows were smashed and the asylum seekers were appearing at the windows. And, you know, I managed to shout through a window to some of them and they looked… you know, they were all fairly young. The ones I saw, you know, teenagers, early 20s, all looked very scared, worried. I shouted through the window, ‘Are you okay?’ And I was holding, holding a thumbs up, and I was saying, ‘Are you okay?’ And they were, a lot of them were replying, ‘Okay, okay.’ You know, a lot of them don't have good English. And then one man shouted down, ‘I am not okay.’ So I think there was a real… you know, this was a, this was a very dangerous situation.

*<CLIP> CHANNEL4 NEWS, ASYLUM SEEKER: They want to kill us… if they catch us.. they gonna to kill us…*

*REPORTER: watching on in horror from their window as an angry crowd tried to turn over a police van*

*<CLIP> THE GUARDIAN: <<shouting>> GET THEM OUT GET THEM OUT GET THEM OUT*

ROBYN: They, you know, the police were covered in sparks and they were wearing fireproof gear and helmets and had big riot shields, so they were safe from the fireworks. But you know, there was quite a lot of times when I saw the police had been relieved from their shift, kind of on the frontline of this battle against the rioters. And they, they'd gone round the corner, gone down a side street. And they were just sitting, you know, with their heads in their hands because it had been such a draining and exhausting day. And a few, a few police officers said to me that, you know, it had been by far, you know, the biggest riot that they'd ever attended.

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ROBYN: Over time, it kind of calmed down. It was, it was – as the evening went on, it tended to be younger rioters who clearly were teenagers. You know, you could tell by their physical stature. But also I spoke to a 16-year-old girl who was there, and she said she recognized a lot of them from school. And some of them were even younger than she was. And that was, that was only one, one riot that happened. A colleague of mine was in one, while I was in Rotherham, he was in Middlesbrough on the other coast, the opposite English coast. And it was different scenes in Middlesbrough because there was not really a specific target. There were, the far right were kind of running riot basically through the town. There weren't enough police. Journalists were being targeted. Because, there's a huge mistrust, among and, you know, all of the rioters and among, I think, the general public at large, really, of journalists and, and people who are videoing and, and filming and, taking photographs as well, and a number of journalists and photographers have been have been hurt or, had had equipment stolen. And my friend, the photographer who was in Middlesbrough, you know, went back to his car to find it, it had been completely smashed up and the police had to drive him home. Otherwise he would have been left kind of on the street, on his own, in the dark. So it's really, you know, been quite a serious situation and then… So the point we’re at at that moment: there've been 400 arrests, but the arrests keep coming because there are so many people involved. And there are more demonstrations due to be held that, you know, there's a lot of likelihood that these are going to turn into riots as well.

SCORING <Stretched too thin – BMC>

NOEL: The Guardian’s Robyn Vinter. Robyn’s going to be back with us after the break to tell us what the rioters want.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. Back with Robyn Vinter. She’s the north of England correspondent for *The Guardian*. And she’s been out in the streets for some of these protests. Robyn, you and other news media are using two words. You’re using “riot” and you’re using “protest.” The people who are protesting: what do they say they want to come out of this?

ROBYN: Well. Some of the protests are kind of local to a situation. But there are kind of broad themes. You know, you hear the phrase we want our country back.

*<CLIP> PROTESTORS: We want our country back… we want our country back…*

ROBYN: A lot of it is about anti… a kind of broader anti-immigration sentiment. There was a feeling – definitely in Rotherham, where I was, where the rioters attacked the hotel housing asylum seekers – that asylum seekers were getting better treatment in the UK than British people were…

*<CLIP> PROTESTOR: It’s our country, and we’re gettin’ pushed out. I understand how the Native Indians felt in America. Now because that’s what the white man did when he pushed ‘em out. Only it’s the white man gettin’ pushed outta this country.*

ROBYN: You know, people were saying, ‘Well, I have to pay my bills. I have to put a roof over my head. I have to work. And these people are coming here and they're living in a hotel and they're not working, not doing anything. They don't have to worry about paying bills.’ There was also – which I found very sinister –  there were rumors going around in certain communities that certain men had been following women home. Or, the rumor in Rotherham was that two women had been raped by asylum seekers and that the authorities had covered it up. And obviously that, you know, for me, that – as a journalist – that would be a very good story if I could stand that up. And I'm just completely unable to find any evidence that that's the case. But it sort of doesn't matter because it, it goes around on social media. People hear it. Everybody has heard… heard it from somebody else. You know, nobody's the person that it's happened to.

NOEL: And those who are in the streets rioting, injuring police officers, destroying public property. What are the rioters saying about what their intent is?

ROBYN: Yeah. It's interesting, because I think there are kind of different groups involved in these riots. So there are the kind of really traditional old school far right. We used to have a group in the UK called the National Front – well, it still exists, but it's not as significant as it was in the 1970s and 1980s – that was a very strong far-right group. A racist group. And so there are some of those kind of people, but there are a lot of younger people. And I think it would be naive to say that they're… that they’re only coming for a fight and they're only coming… You know, in the same way that that we might have football hooliganism in the UK, you know, some people will say that they're they're coming for that, they're coming for the sport of the riot and they're coming to, you know, exert themselves and to, to get something out of their system. There may be a few cases of that – I think there probably are a few cases of that – But there's also, you know, the young people that I heard in these riots chanting things, you know, were saying a lot of the same racist stuff as the older people. So you know, maybe people haven't thought too much about it. Maybe they're not very political people, but, you know, they they might still use a racist slur because they can and because it makes no difference to them and because they don't really think about the harm that those things can cause.

NOEL: This, this all got started with a rumor that the boy who had stabbed these, these little girls was an immigrant. Have rumors continued to contribute to what's going on? Either rumors or deliberate misinformation – sometimes called disinformation, I suppose.

ROBYN: I think disinformation and misinformation has had a really pivotal role in the last seven days.

*<CLIP> FARAGE: It seems – whenever these things happen – there is a reluctance to tell us the full truth. <fade under>*

ROBYN: There have been a lot of deliberate instigators on social media.

*<CLIP> TIMES RADIO: Elon Musk has actually said on his social media platform X that civil war is inevitable in the UK and he’s also said that the reason for these riots is a lack of integration between different communities… <fade under>*

ROBYN: You know, a lot of people, actually, who wouldn't perpetrate violence themselves because they don't want to put themselves at risk and they don't put their families at risk, but will easily goad other people into doing so.

*<CLIP> RIGHT-WING PERSONALITY TOMMY ROBINSON: That’s what you’re seeing. Huge resentment, built up over years if not decades of being treated like shit by your government. And a two-class policing system <fade under>*

ROBYN: Something I haven't mentioned so far as well is there’s something that the far right kind of instigators on social media are calling “two-tier policing.” And that's something where they believe that white British people are getting worse treatment, they're getting more heavy handed treatment by the police than, you know, Muslims or other groups of people.

*<CLIP> FARAGE: We use a softer approach on some groups than others…   
REPORTER: Ok. And your example for that is?   
FARAGE: Well, I think Black Lives Matter, the way that was policed was very interesting. I mean, people tearing down statues and chucking them in the dock, and police just standing by and watching, and I think if you contrast…   
REPORTER: Those people were arrested.*

ROBYN: And so that's a huge… I wouldn't maybe go as far as saying conspiracy theory, but it's kind of a huge talking point among the far right. And even today we heard Elon Musk describe Prime Minister Keir Starmer as “Two-tier Keir,”...

NOEL: Mmm.

ROBYN: …obviously referencing this nonsensical and non-existent idea of two-tier policing.

NOEL: How is… Keir Starmer is just about brand new in the office. This would be his first real crisis – and it is a real crisis. How is he perceived to be handling this and how is he handling this?

ROBYN: Keir Starmer is a very interesting character because, when we had some riots, a very kind of different set of riots in kind of urban areas and London and other cities in 2011, he was the director of public prosecutions. So kind of like your chief prosecutor, essentially making decisions about how these rioters would be handled by the courts, how they'd be prosecuted. And his method of prosecuting was bringing people in quickly, prosecuting them quickly. So there were late night courts running, courts running over the weekend in order to process the large numbers of, of rioters. And so, so far we're seeing something very similar to, to back then he's, you know, he he's very keen on clamping down immediately on the rioters. And you can kind of see the method in that as well.

*<CLIP> STARMER: Be in no doubt: those that have participated in this violence will face the full force of the law. The police will be making arrests. Individuals will be held on remand. Charges will follow, and convictions will follow. I guarantee you will regret taking part in this disorder, whether directly or those whipping up this action online and then running away themselves.*

ROBYN: You know, when people start to see the large sentences that people will be getting for attacking police and for setting fires, they're going to be more likely to think twice before they get involved in the violence.

NOEL: I want to go back to something you said at the beginning of our conversation, which is: We are expecting more of this. More protests. Potentially more rioting, potentially more injuries, potentially more clashes with police. The key point you are making is that this does not appear to be over. What should we take from all of this? What does this tell us more broadly about what is happening in the UK right now?

ROBYN: I think this year, this summer of 2024, is going to be defined, I think, as being a summer of, of rioting. We may have seen the worst of it. That, that could obviously be famous last words, but one thing we do know, obviously, in the UK is: when the weather gets worse, we're not going to see people out on the streets in the same way as we do over the summer.

NOEL: Mm.

ROBYN: We have very short summers in the UK, so you know, we're talking about weeks of this, not months of this, from what I'm able to gather. And so although the riots, I think, will start to die down in the next couple of weeks the sentiment will not go away. And I think it's something that's going to… It's going to take as long as it took to kind of build it up as it is to dissipate it.

NOEL: Mm.

ROBYN: And I don't have any answers about what we can do to kind of improve that sentiment. And, you know, that's… It’s something that I feel very worried about. And I feel… although we, we in the UK rarely descend into any kind of real nationwide violence, you know, there's – people from abroad have been saying that, ‘Oh, you know, it's going to end in a civil war.’ And it's, you know, that's absurd. But, we do have to worry about… about this.

SCORING <Cellocell>

ROBYN: You know. we have to worry about it because, if it doesn't end the civil war in the UK, that sentiment exists in other countries as well. And, you know, places that aren’t as… you know, don't have that kind of history, you know, long legacy of, like, a stable history. This kind of thing could be a spark that kind of lights a fire somewhere else as well.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: That was *The Guardian’s* Robyn Vinter. Many thanks also to Andrew Knox of leading magazine *The Economist*.

Today’s show was produced by Amanda Lewellyn and Victoria Chamberlin and edited by Amina al-Sadi. Matthew Collette and Peter Balonon-Rosen fact-checked, and our engineers are Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]