

Tens of thousands demand justice for the 'Jena 6'

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An estimated 20,000 to 30,000 demonstrators filled the streets of Jena, Louisiana this past Thursday in support of six African-American teenagers initially charged with attempted murder in the beating of a white classmate.

The enthusiastic crowd that included celebrities, human rights activists, college students, congressmen and demonstrators of every skin color broke into chants of "Free the Jena Six" as the Rev. Al Sharpton arrived at the local courthouse with family members of the jailed high school students.

Martin Luther King III said last week's gathering reminded him of the marches during the historic civil rights movement that his father often led. He said punishment of some sort may be in order for the six defendants, but "the justice system isn't applied the same to all crimes and all people."

The six teens were charged after Jena district attorney Reed Walters decided not to charge three white high school students who hung nooses in a tree on their high school grounds. Five of the black teens were initially charged with attempted murder, but that charge was reduced to battery for all but one, who has yet to be arraigned; the sixth teen was charged as a juvenile.

"While we applaud the actions of Louisiana's Third Circuit Court of Appeals last Friday (Sept. 14) vacating the conviction of Mychal Bell, this is only a first step to address the human rights issues in this case," Ajamu Baraka, executive director of the U.S. Human Rights Network said a day before the Sept. 20 Jena protest. "Authorities must take immediate further action to ensure that the overall culture of the school respects human rights and promotes understanding across communities."

Catherine Albisa, executive director of the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI), said, "A wide range of studies, including NESRI's own latest human rights report - 'Deprived of Dignity' - demonstrate that the circumstances surrounding the Jena 6 are one manifestation of degrading school environments and the criminalization of students found across the country. This is a human rights crisis in education that merits an urgent national response."

"This is the most blatant example of disparity in the justice system that we've seen," the Rev. Al Sharpton told CBS's "The Early Show" before arriving in Jena. "You can't have two standards of justice."

"We didn't bring race in it," Sharpton added. "Those that hung the nooses brought the race into it."

Sharpton, one of the organizers of last week's rally, said the spirited demonstration could mark the beginning of the 21st century's civil rights movement, one that would challenge disparities in the justice system.

A day before the rally, Jena D.A. Reed Walters denied that racism was involved in the charges.

He told The Associated Press that he didn't charge the white students accused of hanging the nooses because he could find no Louisiana law under which they could be charged. In the beating case, he said, four of the defendants were of adult age under Louisiana law and the only juvenile charged as an adult, Mychal Bell, had a prior criminal record.

"It is not and never has been about race," Walters said. "It is about finding justice for an innocent victim and holding people accountable for their actions."

The white teen who was beaten, Justin Barker, was knocked unconscious, his face badly swollen and bloodied, though he was able to attend a school function later that night.

Bell, 16 at the time of the attack, is the only one of the "Jena Six" to be tried so far. He was convicted on an aggravated second-degree battery count that could have sent him to prison for 15 years, but the conviction was overturned Sept. 14 when a state appeals court said he should not have been tried as an adult.

Thursday's protest had been planned to coincide with Bell's sentencing, but organizers decided to follow through even after the conviction was thrown out. Bell remains in jail while prosecutors prepare an appeal. His family has been unable to pay the \$90,000 bond.

There seemed to be as many reasons for coming to Jena, La. last week as there were demonstrators.

"We all have family members about the age of these guys. We said it could have been one of them. We wanted to try to do something," said Angela Merrick, 36, of Atlanta, who drove with three friends from Atlanta to protest the treatment of the teens.

"I came because enough is enough. I am tired of the way the courts have been treating African Americans historically," Doug Martin, a computer analyst from New Orleans, told Reuters news service.

"What we're seeing today in Jena is no different than what we or our parents saw," Don Johnson, 60, of Detroit told The Detroit Free Press.

"We're separate, but not equal," he added, referring to the language used in the landmark Plessy v. Ferguson case in which the U.S. Supreme Court decided in 1896 that declared "separate, but equal" facilities for black people and white people legal.

"I'm not condoning the Jena Six if they've done something wrong," Johnson emphasized, adding that the law should be applied "fairly and honestly." "I couldn't fathom going to jail for 15 years for a fight I didn't start," Tony Walker, 20, a junior studying finance at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, added.

Dennis Courtland Hayes, interim president and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, compared last week's massive outpouring of support for the Jena 6 to the controversy that followed racially insensitive remarks made several months ago by radio talk-show host Don Imus.

"People are saying, 'That's enough, and we're not taking it any more,'" Hayes said.

A day before the rally, a coalition of more than 30 human rights organizations and scholars, including Amnesty International USA, Human Rights Watch, the U.S. Human Rights Network and the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI), called on Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco to closely monitor the criminal proceedings against the Jena 6 and condemn the hanging of nooses from a tree on the Jena High School campus. The coalition also reminded Blanco of international human rights laws that protect children from being unfairly tried as adults. "We understand that consequences must be imposed for their actions," it said in a letter to the governor. "However, international human rights laws binding on the federal government and the state of Louisiana recognize that children should not be tried as adults or subjected to excessive punishments that fail to focus on their rehabilitation. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which the United States became a party in 1992, specifically acknowledges the need for special treatment of children in the criminal justice system and emphasizes the importance of their rehabilitation... Moreover, Article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that 'The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child ... shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.'"

The rally was heavily promoted on black Web sites, blogs, radio and publications. Although state police declined to give crowd estimates, participants at the park and the courthouse appeared to easily amount to tens of thousands.

The spirits of the demonstrators were buoyed by the involvement of a number of celebrities who voiced their support for the Jena 6 over the past few weeks. Radio personality Michael Baisden hosted a rally the night before the Sept. 20 demonstration at the Alexandria Riverfront Center. A portion of the proceeds from that event are being donated to the legal defense fund. On Sept. 7, rapper-actor Mos Def told a national audience on HBO's "Real Time with Bill Maher" that he planned to attend the Sept. 20 protest in Jena, Louisiana and challenged other rappers like Jay-Z and Kanye West to do the same. Two days before the protest, it was announced that legendary British rocker David Bowie donated \$10,000 to a legal defense fund for the Jena 6.

"There is clearly a separate and unequal judicial process going on in the town of Jena," Bowie said Tuesday in an e-mail statement. "A donation to the Jena Six Legal Defense Fund is my small gesture indicating my belief that a wrongful charge and sentence should be prevented."

Bishop T.D. Jakes, senior pastor of The Potter's House in Dallas, Texas, contributed \$6,000 Thursday to the legal defense fund and called on others committed to justice and equality to follow suit.

"I reach out and challenge those of us who can, to contribute financially to the defense of these young men," Jakes said. "Perhaps you are unable to be there physically. Your schedule like mine may not always allow you to show up on a particular day or time.... However, I challenge those of us who can to give financially, not for publicity, not for fame, not for notoriety, but because it is the right thing to do.

"There is an old saying, when you are searching for something, 'It is better to light a candle and see, than to scream blindly into the darkness,'" Jakes continued. "Financial support combined with raising the awareness of an injustice by protest, is a powerful resource that can yield incredible results. I implore you to, after we have so vividly pointed out the injustice's that still haunt our country, to provide the financial backing to allow them to fight the good fight. It is our responsibility to ensure that justice is served and I challenge each one of you who can, to make a financial contribution so these young men will have the chance to stand up and defend themselves. If all of us do what we can, the job will get done."

Students came from universities across the region, including historically black colleges like Xavier University, Dillard University, Morehouse College, Spelman College, Clark Atlanta University, Howard University, Hampton University, Prairie View A&M University and Southern University. Students from predominantly white schools like Temple University, Louisiana State University, University of Louisiana-Lafayette and Georgia Southern University were also well-represented at last week's gathering.

Brandon Lewis, president of the National Pan-Hellenic Council at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, told The Lafayette Daily Advertiser that what is happening in Jena, La. has opened many students' eyes.

"Them being high school students, it's our generation. And for us to see racism still exists, we felt like we needed to do something," Lewis said.

He added that those who went to Jena Thursday to take a stand for justice know that they'll forever be part of history.

"We'll remember this for the rest of our lives. We'll know that we were there and we did something and didn't stay silent like so many other people," Lewis said.

Mervin Harmon, 80, a member of the legendary Tuskegee Airmen, attended the Jena 6 protest with his son, Jarvis Harmon of True Vine Ministries and other local church leaders. The elder Harmon, who was the first black elected to the Lafayette Police Jury in 1974 and one of the leaders of the local civil rights movement, told The Lafayette Daily Advertiser that it's time for more young people to step up and actively join the ongoing struggle for justice in America.

"Many of the things I see happening there are things I saw happening as a young man in this community, and I thought we were past that," Harmon said. "The younger generation, most of them are not aware of the struggles we went through in order for them to get enrolled at UL," Harmon said. "It was SLI then. I remember the struggle."

While Harmon called the massive involvement by young people in Jena last week a "good gesture," he added that young people have the responsibility to carry out a sustained effort to fight racial and social injustice.

"I think they can do some good to open up avenues of advancement for us as people," Harmon said. "We did not have the educational background that they have today. Most of us didn't have a formal education, but we had courage. We tried to work with, not in opposition with the establishment, and we got things done."

Tina Cheatham told The Associated Press that she missed the civil rights marches at Selma, Montgomery and Little Rock, but she had no intention of missing another brush with history. The 24-year-old Georgia Southern University graduate drove all night to reach the small town in central Louisiana. "It was a good chance to be part of something historic since I wasn't around for the civil rights movement. This is kind of the 21st-century version of it," she said.

Some of Jena's 3,500 residents expressed concerns about safety. Hotels were booked from as far away as Natchez, Miss., to Alexandria, La.

Red Cross officials set up first aid stations near the local courthouse and had water and snacks on hand. Portable toilets and flashing street signs to aid in traffic direction were in place. While many of Jena's businesses closed for the day, at least one white teacher at Jena High School gave demonstrators food and water and allowed them to use her restroom. At the courthouse troopers chatted amiably with each other and with demonstrators who began showing up well before dawn.

Sharpton, who helped organize the protest, met Bell at the courthouse Wednesday morning and said the teen was encouraged by the demonstration of support and wanted to make sure it stayed peaceful.

"He doesn't want anything done that would disparage his name - no violence, not even a negative word," Sharpton told The Associated Press.

Following the rally, a town hall meeting and panel discussion were scheduled to be held in Alexandria, LA entitled, "Restoring the Human Right to Education: Abolishing the School to Prison Pipeline." Speakers included Ajamu Baraka, the U.S. Human Rights Network's executive director, Cathy Albisa, NESRI's executive director, Howard University law professor Lisa Crooms and Judge Pamela Johnson from Louisiana. For details, visit http://www.nesri.org/media_updates/Jena6.html.

Less than a day after the march, Alexandria, La. police arrested a man early Friday morning when officers found hangman's nooses dangling from the rear of his pickup truck. The driver has not yet been identified. Alexandria, La., less than an hour's drive away from Jena, played host to many of the demonstrators seeking food and hotels the night before the march.

The state district court in Jena scheduled a hearing Friday to decide whether the judge who has been hearing the case until now should be made to step aside from a bond hearing ordered Thursday by a state appeal court.

During Thursday's protest in Jena, Louisiana's 3rd Circuit Court of Appeal in Lake Charles ordered a bond hearing for Mychal Bell within 72 hours, defense attorney Bob Noel of Monroe said.

On last Friday afternoon a juvenile court in Jena denied Mychal Bell's bail request, the father of one of Bell's co-defendants told reporters. Bell's mother reportedly left the courthouse in tears and refused to comment.

The Rev. Al Sharpton told the Associated Press Thursday that he and Reps. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, and William Jefferson, D-La., will press the House Judiciary Committee this week to summon Jena district attorney Reed Walters to explain his actions before Congress.

In Washington, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee said he would hold hearings on the case, though he did not set a date or say if the prosecutor would be called to testify.

During last week's rally in Jena, La., others gathered near Capitol Hill in support of the Jena 6.

President Bush said he empathized with the demonstrators and that the FBI was monitoring the situation.

"The events in Louisiana have saddened me," the president told reporters at the White House. "All of us in America want there to be, you know, fairness when it comes to justice."

"What we need is federal intervention to protect people from Southern injustice," Sharpton told the AP. "Our fathers in the 1960's had to penetrate the Kennedy and Johnson administrations; we have to do the same thing."_

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