



People gather against an anti-immigration protest in London Aug. 7. Anti-immigration protests and counter-demonstrations broke out across England and in Northern Ireland in response to misinformation online that the suspect in the fatal stabbing of three little girls in Southport, England, July 29 was a Muslim asylum-seeker. (OSV News/Reuters/Chris Ratcliffe)



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The Catholic community and other faith groups are banding together to condemn the ongoing riots taking place across England and Northern Ireland.

Riots broke out in the region following the July 29 murder of [three children](#) at a summer dance class in Southport, England. Eight other children suffered stab wounds, according to police. A 17-year-old born in the U.K. to Rwandan immigrant parents has been [charged](#) in the case.

The suspect is not an asylum seeker, nor did he enter the country illegally, as initial reports on social media claimed, prompting a number of anti-immigrant protests. Protesters attacked a hotel housing asylum seekers and assaulted police officers and first responders. They also threw bricks and gasoline bombs at local mosques.

More than a dozen towns and cities across the two countries have seen violent riots, lootings and arson described as the worst unrest since the violent riots across the U.K. in 2011.

In a [joint letter](#), Cardinal Vincent Nichols, president of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, along with other local faith leaders condemned the riots which they said brought "hatred, violence and vandalism to towns and cities across the country."

"We have seen anti-Muslim hatred and the targeting of mosques; asylum seekers and refugees attacked; violence directed towards the police and private property, all of which are a stain on our national moral conscience," said the letter, co-signed by Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, Chief Imam Sayed Razawi and Imam Qari Asim from the Imams National Advisory Board.

The letter noted that every British citizen has a right to be "respected and a responsibility to respect others, so that together we can build a cohesive and harmonious society for all."

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â??Auxiliary Bishop Paul McAleenan

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In a [statement](#), Auxiliary Bishop Paul McAleenan of Westminster condemned the violence "directed at migrants and their places of residence," and said these protests "demonstrate a complete disregard of the values which underpin the civil life of our country."

McAleenan continued: "Today, and always, we need to continue to pray, work and stand together for peace in our country. The actions of the few involved in violence stands in stark contrast to the work of charities, church groups, and volunteers who tirelessly extend the hand of welcome to migrants in acts of solidarity. We hope and pray that they will redouble their efforts so that we can rebuild communities after the terrible events of the last few days."

He also offered prayers for those "sheltering in hotels or feeling threatened."

"You are loved and welcome here. We all should do what we can to make sure that you feel safe," he said. "My prayers are also with the emergency services, who selflessly continue to work despite the risks. Thank you for all that you do in the service of the common good."

In a similar [statement](#), Liverpool Archbishop Malcolm McMahon asked for prayers for "peace, healing and justice for the victims" of the riots.

"We hold in our thoughts and prayers all those involved in the Major Incident in Southport," the statement said. "For those who have been injured, for those who are parents, family, and friends of the injured, for all involved in the emergency services, we pray for God's blessing, God's peace, and God's presence today."

Peter Shepard, a priest based in Newcastle, said the riots are unfortunate, noting that those who perpetuate hate crimes should be held to account.

"Everyone should come together irrespective of religion, ethnic background or race and support each other," he said. "These protests go against everything we stand for."

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Since the unrest started, [Muslim immigrants](#), asylum seekers and people of color have been targeted in a wave of growing anti-immigrant sentiments. Far-right groups have been accused of exacerbating the situation through hate speech and online misinformation.

Prime minister Keir Starmer [accused](#) far-right groups and individuals online of exploiting the deaths of the three girls to fuel attacks on asylum seekers and people of color, promising to prosecute all those involved in the violent protests. The government has repeated its commitment to protect citizens and immigrants in the country.

"Those involved will feel the full force of the law," he said. "Nobody should involve themselves in this disorder."

This is not Starmer's first time dealing with widespread protests. During the 2011 [violent riots](#) which engulfed Britain, Starmer was the director of public prosecutions in charge of prosecuting offenders. Now, with his current position, he is making tougher calls to hold those leading the protests and pushing hate speech online responsible.

More than [1,000 arrests](#) have been made in connection to the riots, with hundreds of charges filed. The number of arrests is expected to triple in the coming weeks. The government announced plans to make more than [500](#) new prison places available to deal with arrested rioters.

Faith groups are rallying together and organizing anti-protest and anti-racism demonstrations across the U.K. to [condemn](#) the riots and reject hate in a show of unity. More demonstrations are planned in the coming days and weeks.

The Muslim community has received support and solidarity from individuals and groups as a way of bringing about healing and peace in affected areas and communities.

Shortly after the attacks in Southport, Auxiliary Bishop Tom Neylon of Liverpool, alongside other faith leaders, [called for peace](#) and unity and an end to the violence.

"There are other ways of resolving issues which you might feel that we do not agree with in our society. So, let's use those methods to bring about the peace and the healing we need at this moment," Neylon said.