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Chaos In Ferguson After Grand Jury Decision

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(New York Times) -- CLAYTON, Mo. — A St. Louis County grand jury has brought no criminal charges against Darren Wilson, a white police officer who fatally shot Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager, more than three months ago in nearby Ferguson.

The decision by the grand jury of nine whites and three blacks was announced Monday night by the St. Louis County prosecutor, Robert P. McCulloch, at a news conference packed with reporters from around the world. The killing, on a residential street in Ferguson, set off weeks of civil unrest — and a national debate — fueled by protesters' outrage over what they called a pattern of police brutality against young black men. Mr. McCulloch said Officer Wilson had faced charges ranging from first-degree murder to

involuntary manslaughter.

Word of the decision set off a new wave of anger among hundreds who had gathered outside the Ferguson Police Department. Police officers in riot gear stood in a line as demonstrators chanted and threw signs and other objects toward them as the news spread. "The system failed us again," one woman said. In downtown Ferguson, the sound of breaking glass could be heard as crowds ran through the streets.

As the night went on, the situation grew more intense and chaotic in several locations around the region. Bottles and rocks were thrown at officers, and windows of businesses were smashed. Several police cars were burned; buildings, including a Walgreens, a meat market and a storage facility, were on fire, and looting was reported in several businesses. Gunshots could be heard along the streets of Ferguson, and law enforcement authorities deployed smoke and gas to control the crowds. In St. Louis, protesters swarmed Interstate 44 and blocked all traffic near the neighborhood where another man was shot by police this fall.

Before midnight, St. Louis County police officers reported heavy automatic gunfire in the area where some of the largest protests were taking place. Flights to Lambert-St. Louis International Airport were not permitted to land late Monday as a safety precaution, officials said.

Mayor James Knowles III of Ferguson, reached on his cellphone late Monday, said he was there and wanted to see National Guard troops, some of whom were stationed at a police command center, move to protect his city. "They're here in the area," he said. "I don't know why they're not deploying."

Just after 1 a.m., Gov. Jay Nixon called up additional members of the National Guard to Ferguson, where they will provide security for the police headquarters.

At a news conference around 1:30 a.m., Jon Belmar, the St. Louis County police chief, said at least a dozen buildings had been set on fire.

"As soon as Mr. McCulloch announced the verdict, the officers started taking rocks and batteries," said Chief Belmar, who said he personally heard about 150 shots fired. He said the police did not fire a shot.

He added that 29 people were arrested.

"I didn't foresee an evening like this," Chief Belmar said. The night's damage had been far worse than any of the nights of unrest that had followed the shooting in August, he said. Continue reading the main story

Mr. Brown's family issued a statement expressing sadness, but calling for peaceful protest and a campaign to require body cameras on police officers nationwide. "We are profoundly disappointed that the killer of our child will not face the consequence of his actions," the statement said. "While we understand that many others share our pain, we ask that you channel your frustration in ways that will make a positive change. We need to work together to fix the system that allowed this to happen."

But outside the police station, Lesley McSpadden, Mr. Brown's mother, voiced frustration with the decision. "They wrong!" she yelled, pointing toward the police officers standing outside of the station. "Y'all know y'all wrong!"

At the White House, President Obama appealed for peaceful protest and "care and restraint" from law enforcement after the grand jury's decision not to indict Officer Wilson, even as he said the situation spoke to broader racial challenges in America.

"We have made enormous progress in race relations over the course of the past several decades," Mr. Obama said in the briefing room, where he made an unusual late-night appearance to respond to the decision. "But what is also true is that there are still problems, and communities of color aren't just making these problems up."

Protests, often well organized and orderly, also occurred in cities across the country, including Los Angeles, Seattle, Philadelphia and Chicago, where about 200 mostly young and mostly white protesters gathered at police headquarters, despite frigid temperatures and light snow.

In a lengthy news conference, Mr. McCulloch described the series of events, step by step, that had led to the shooting, and the enormous array of evidence and witnesses brought before the grand jury. He described an altercation inside Officer Wilson's vehicle, after which Officer Wilson had Mr. Brown's blood on his weapon, shirt and pants, the prosecutor said, as well as swelling and redness on his face.

As news of the decision spread, protesters surged forward, throwing objects at officers in riot gear. The sound of gunfire could be heard. 2 Police officers used tear gas and smoke to disperse people who were hurling rocks and breaking the windows of parked police cruisers. A vehicle was set on fire. 3 At least a dozen buildings were set on fire around the city, many in the vicinity of Ferguson Market and Liquor, the store Michael Brown was in before he was killed by Officer Wilson.

"Physical evidence does not look away as events unfold," he said.

Mr. McCulloch also pointed to inconsistent and changing statements from witnesses, including observations about the position of Mr. Brown's hands. Some witnesses have said he had his hands up as the final shots were fired. The prosecutor, who had faced widespread calls to recuse himself after opponents cited what they called flawed investigations, took the unusual step of directing his staff to present "absolutely everything" — rather than a witness or two — to the grand jury.

Even before the decision was announced, National Guard troops were sent to a police command post; political leaders, including Governor Nixon, flew in to hold last-minute meetings with community members; schools closed for the week; and businesses and residents, including parents of schoolchildren, braced for what might come next.

Mr. Nixon, who had declared a state of emergency and called up the Missouri National Guard last week, called for peace and calm in a news conference several hours before the decision was announced. "Our shared hope and expectation is that regardless of the decision, people on all sides show tolerance, mutual respect and restraint," he said.

Yet many here questioned why the authorities would announce the decision in the evening, rather than waiting for daylight hours. Furious, sometimes violent, demonstrations and tense clashes with the police took place late into the night for several weeks in August, and some law enforcement officers had urged a daytime announcement. Over a period of weeks, many leaders here had suggested that a Sunday morning announcement would be best, but the grand jury, which had been meeting on the case since Aug. 20, finished its work on Monday. Asked about the timing, Mr. Nixon said it had been the choice of Mr. McCulloch.

Many of the elaborate plans for how the grand jury's decision would be released — including 48-hour notice for the police after the decision — appeared to have been scrapped. The family of Mr. Brown, 18, who was killed by Officer Wilson on Aug. 9, was notified by prosecutors in the afternoon, after some reports had already appeared on television and online. A lawyer for the family expressed frustration that they had not been told sooner.

The lawyer, Benjamin Crump, added that the family would be exploring their legal options now that the grand jury has failed to indict Officer Wilson. "They don't trust this prosecutor; they never did from the beginning," Mr. Crump said. "And they are going to try to see if they can do something to get some positive change out of this because they understand this system needs to be changed."

Since August, Officer Wilson has stayed close to St. Louis, reading news articles and following television coverage of the case, those close to him said. He has made no public statements or appearances. In a private ceremony in October, he married his fiancée, Barbara Spradling, also a Ferguson police officer, court records show. Officer Wilson, who testified before the grand jury for more than four hours, saying he was convinced that his life was in danger, remains on paid administrative leave from the police department, but local officials said they expected that he would resign in the coming days, regardless of the grand jury's decision.

The Brown family has, by contrast, traveled widely to speak out, including appearing at the BET Hip Hop Awards, meeting with United Nations officials in Geneva and talking with protesters near the spot where Mr. Brown was killed.

Mr. Brown's father, Michael Brown Sr., handed out turkeys to needy families over the weekend, and he filmed a public service announcement urging calm once the grand jury decision was announced. The parents have been pushing for what supporters have called the Michael Brown Law, which would require officers to wear body cameras.

As the news of the decision spread, school officials were deciding whether to open schools on Tuesday. At least one district canceled after-school and evening activities, and at least four announced they would not hold classes on Tuesday.

All around, there were signs of businesses closing at the prospect of trouble. At least two area malls, including the St. Louis Galleria and the Plaza Frontenac, closed early on Monday evening.

Another investigation, a federal civil rights inquiry into the case, continues, though federal officials have said that the evidence so far does not support such a case against Officer Wilson. A second federal investigation is examining whether the Ferguson police have

engaged in a pattern of civil rights violations.

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