

Baker: Curfew decisions up to local officials

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Gov. Charlie Baker brushed off the idea of imposing a statewide curfew on Monday after violence followed protests against police brutality a day earlier, and criticized President Donald Trump's leadership as "nowhere to be found" amid a time of massive social upheaval.

State leaders will work to ensure that any additional demonstrations this week "are as peaceful as they can be" and will urge participants to take public health precautions, Baker said at a Monday press conference. While the National Guard will remain on hand if necessary as it has been for several months during the pandemic, the governor described hard cutoffs on public activity as a decision in the hands of local officials.

"We tend to let locals make decisions with respect to what they think makes the most sense for their communities," Baker said when asked about the possibility of a statewide curfew. "They know it better than we do, and then we try to support and supplement their efforts."

In New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Monday announced a curfew and an increased police presence for New York City, where residents also staged massive demonstrations Sunday.

Protests erupted across the country over the past week in response to the deaths of several Black Americans in police custody. In Minneapolis, George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, died last week after white police officer Derek Chauvin – who was fired and now faces murder and manslaughter charges –

kneeled on his neck for close to nine minutes during an arrest.

City officials say 20,000 people took to the streets in Boston on Sunday in largely peaceful demonstrations. Later in the night, violence broke out between police and a smaller number of instigators, leading to the burning of a police car and some looting.

Baker's appearance was his first since Friday, when he said in response to a video of Floyd's death, "I can't imagine why people wouldn't want to get out in the streets and make a point about it."

"The murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police was a horrible tragedy, one of countless tragedies to befall people of color across the United States," Baker said Monday.

Earlier on Monday, Trump told a group of governors that their response to protests was "weak" and demanded harsher crackdowns.

"You have to dominate," Trump said during the call, according to audio published by the Washington Post. "If you don't dominate, you're wasting your time – they're going to run over you, you're going to look like a bunch of jerks."

Baker was not on the call, but – without being prompted – he denounced Trump's approach during his Monday press conference, offering some of his most pointed criticism of the Republican president for whom he did not vote to date.

"I know I should be surprised when I hear incendiary words like this from him, but I'm not," Baker, a Republican, said during his opening comments Monday. "Like so many times during these past several weeks when the country needed compassion and leadership the most, it was simply nowhere to be found. Instead, we got bitterness, combativeness and self-interest."

While he praised the earlier demonstrations, Baker criticized the “criminals and cowards that tarnished that night” with violent altercations. The people of Massachusetts, he said, “cannot let these individuals succeed in their goal to sow chaos into the fabric of what is an important effort and movement.”

The governor said he did not know if the violence was spurred by outside actors as some have suggested, but said the “mood and attitude” among the much greater number of peaceful marchers was far different from those who threw bottles or looted stores.

Boston officials said police arrested 53 individuals from Sunday’s violence, 27 of whom hailed from outside the city. Nine police officers and 18 civilians were hospitalized for injuries.

U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling said Monday that “loud, even disruptive” protests are a viable way to demand accountability for Floyd’s killers, but criticized theft and vandalism as “crime, and nothing more.”

“Let me be clear: the violence and destruction last night in Boston was an embarrassment to the movement for police reform and accountability,” Lelling said in a press release. “The Boston Police, supported by State Police, Transit Police, federal law enforcement and the National Guard, was doing its job – the dangerous, necessary job of protecting the public safety. I support them completely and, if needed, I will use federal charges to make that point.”

At the start of his Monday press conference, Baker read lengthy prepared remarks in which he renewed vocal support for the peaceful demonstrations and for their demands that police face greater accountability.

People of color, he said, experience racism and injustice “on a daily basis” through personal and professional avenues. When

abuse comes from law enforcement or other public institutions that ostensibly serve justice, “that can often be the most despicable act of all,” Baker said.

“Injustices that Black Americans experience every day, and their devastating cumulative effect, don’t care about state boundaries,” Baker said. “We all have an obligation to see and address these issues. We have an obligation to use our strength the right way to continue that march toward progress.”

Baker said he has spoken in recent days with public safety experts and elected officials, including those representing Black and Latinx communities, who raised “many bright ideas” about action that state leaders can take to achieve that progress.

“We must find ways to enhance transparency and accountability in the law enforcement and criminal justice systems,” Baker said. “Without it, bad actors will continue to smear those who do the right thing every day, and the very best among them will never get the gratitude that they deserve.”

Asked if he supported any specific legislation on Beacon Hill to reform law enforcement, Baker said “there are several” but that he wants to discuss them more with stakeholders first. He said his administration would make a proposal “sometime soon.”