

The West Australian

Show of solidarity amid grief turns sour

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It was a show of solidarity for another young Aboriginal life lost, allegedly at the hands of a white man in a big white truck.

But that support from Kalgoorlie's indigenous community yesterday for the family of teenager Elijah Doughty, who died as his schoolmates were beginning another week at the local high school on Monday, quickly turned angry and ugly.

This was not just a protest or a stand-off.

This was a riot, which started with hundreds of rocks thrown at courtroom windows and escalated into broken pavers thrown at dozens of police wielding shields and batons and protected by dogs.

Local leaders, white and black, say it should represent a watermark moment, a line in the red Goldfields dirt, to spark an improvement in WA race relations.

Because today, they must be near a record low.

The grief in town had been evident on Monday evening, hours after Elijah, 14, had died in the scrub off the end of Clancy Street just 10 minutes out of town.

Police will allege that the scooter the teen was riding on was stolen the day before, similar to one of the dozens of crimes reported on a Kalgoorlie crime Facebook page by increasingly exasperated locals.

Some of that exasperation, however, had its heart in something darker.

"There is going to be a revenge of some sort very soon," one said on Facebook.

Another asked: "How many bodies would it take to fill all the mine shafts?"

A third: "Run them over."

Indigenous residents say the website and the comments on it had been an issue for months, stoking tensions in existence for decades. So when news spread of the death of the boy and how police believed a man in a Nissan Navara had pursued him for minutes before his death, worry was replaced with grief and fury.

The grief was evident at the scene of Elijah's death, where family and friends gathered to light a fire and lament their loss.

Twelve hours later, at the court where the man in that car was due to face a charge of manslaughter, family gathered again, joined by dozens of indigenous residents determined to see justice in action.

Officials at the court building were prepared for something, but not this.

When it became evident all those coming into court would be searched, a throng surged through an open door, before angrily confronting staff inside. After being

asked to leave, the ever-growing group then stood in the middle of Kalgoorlie's famous intersection overlooked by the Exchange Hotel, and refused to move.

Traffic backed up, tensions grew.

As the time of the court appearance approached, and the main gates to the entrance of the court had been closed, some vaulted over, while others shook the gates open.

Then the rocks started flying, taken from a garden bed, quickly followed by bottles.

It sounded like a hail storm, and then thunder as two huge windows shattered.

As the family of Elijah were ushered into court, through the broken glass, to see the man accused of unlawfully killing their boy, outside the violence was escalating.

In front of mothers with prams and workers with coffee, police stood off against those wanting to voice their anger.

And after a local magistrate decided it was not safe for the accused to face the court, and asked the family to leave, that anger turned to violence.

Pleadings from the boy's family and from local police for peace appeared to have worked. But a spark further down the street prompted an ugly arrest, and then bottles started flying and pavers were smashed to use as missiles.

Police cars became the target, and then the officers with shields and batons were pelted with rocks the size of hammers.

Twelve officers were hurt, as was the image of one of WA's oldest and iconic towns. The pain of Elijah's family, and the wounds of a bitter division, will take much longer to heal.

Local Aboriginal elder Aubrey Lynch said the family and the town would wait to see how the justice system treated the man accused.

"If they don't do the right thing, you might get more riots in town ... I can't see it stopping," he said.