

NAACP Official: Zimmerman Verdict 'Like an Atomic Bomb Dropped'

The not guilty verdict in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin has reshaped a black civil rights convention in Orlando, Fla., where delegates are calling for federal charges following a trial they say failed to serve justice.

The civil rights activists were gathering for the annual convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) just 30 minutes drive from where the murder trial took place when the jury issued its decision on Saturday night.

The verdict by a nearly all-white jury of six women in the trial of former neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman reverberated around the country and rocked the convention of 3,000 national, state and local officers and members.

Speeches were hastily re-written, agendas altered and conversation in the halls re-focused.

More than 800,000 people have signed an online petition of the NAACP asking U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder to file civil rights charges against Zimmerman, the association said on Monday.

"It was like an atomic bomb dropped," said Michael Edwards, 55, a union official and NAACP member from St. Louis.

On Tuesday, the convention will hear from Holder, who on Monday called the death of Martin, an unarmed black teenager, "unnecessary," raising questions about whether he believed Zimmerman, acted in self-defense.

"The Justice Department shares your concern," Holder said,

triggering an enthusiastic response from some 14,000 black sorority members at a Washington convention center.

The Justice Department said it would reopen its investigation into the case to determine whether any civil rights laws had been violated by the state court handling it.

NAACP Chief Warns of 'Great Peril'

The Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 would require the government to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Zimmerman, who is white and Hispanic, shot Martin because of race.

The Seminole County jury in the town of Sanford, Fla., rejected the second-degree murder charge that Zimmerman acted with ill will, spite or hatred.

Ben Jealous, the NAACP's president, said he cried when he heard of the Zimmerman verdict Saturday night in the Orlando hotel suite where he was meeting with his board and staff. He put his one-year-old son to bed and rushed to comfort the thousand black youth attending the convention this week.

At a nearby hotel, the high school and college delegates, the future of the 104-year-old civil rights organization, reacted viscerally. Jealous found some tears, some anger and some hard to read faces. Grief counselors were enlisted to help.

Jealous had intended for his keynote speech to address the body blow delivered on June 25 by the U.S. Supreme Court in repealing provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 which required federal preclearance of changes of voting practices in jurisdictions with a history of voting discrimination.

Instead, the speech he delivered reflected the second blow delivered by the jury.

"These are not only times of great possibility, they are also times of great peril. We hear it in the Supreme Court's decision in Shelby County v. Holder. We see it in the verdict

handed down in Sanford two nights ago. And we feel it every time we watch one of our young sons—or nephews—walk out the front door and pull up his hoodie over his head,” Jealous said.

Jealous also highlighted efforts to ban New York’s controversial “stop-and-frisk” policy used by police to stop people suspected of unlawful activity and frisking those suspected of carrying weapons.

Critics of the policy say it targets minorities and violates their Fourth Amendment rights for protection against unreasonable searches and seizures.

Dredging Up a Bad Past

Lenwood Graham, 18, a high school senior from Laurinburg, N.C., said youth leaders at the convention talked to them about “how we should not let our anger or emotions cloud our judgment and make wrong decisions.”

“I just want to change laws,” he said.

Christian Minter, 15, a high school sophomore from Chatham, Pa., said she now understands her mother’s unyielding belief that the world would always be divided along racial lines.

“I thought it wouldn’t. It (the verdict) told me it would always be like that,” Minter said.

Tony Henderson, 52, an engineer from Seattle worked with youth participating in the convention’s annual arts and science competition which in years past has drawn the likes of successful rappers and music producers such as Kanye West and Lauryn Hill.

“The kids thought it isn’t like it used to be. This told them it is what it used to be,” Henderson said.

The youth delegates rolled out a campaign against violence against black youth with the slogan “A child was shot today,”

modeled on signs hoisted in another era at NAACP offices that read "A man was lynched yesterday."

(Additional reporting by Daniel Trotta. Editing by David Adams and Andrew Hay)