

Cameron says will mend 'broken society' after riots (Update)
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WITNEY, England (Aug 15, 2011): Prime Minister David Cameron today promised a law and order "fightback" and robust action to mend what he called Britain's broken society after riots and looting last week shocked Britons and tarnished its reputation abroad.

But he faced renewed questions over how far his plans to cut government spending may further alienate the young and the poor.

In a speech full of tough language likely to please his traditional Conservative supporters, Cameron vowed more "no-nonsense policing" and tougher sentencing to tackle gang culture and known troublemakers, and said he would do more to promote families, boost discipline in schools and encourage hard work.

In north London, where riots began nine days ago, many welcomed his hard line – but young people ushered in to hear his speech in rural Oxfordshire doubted it would do much to close a growing gap between rich and poor, or heal troubled communities facing his government's deep public spending cuts.

"We have been too unwilling for too long to talk about what is right and wrong," Cameron said in a speech at a youth centre in his mostly affluent constituency of Witney, near Oxford.

More than 2,800 people have been arrested since a protest over a fatal shooting by police on Aug 4 prompted rioting and looting in the poor London district of Tottenham. That spread across the capital and sparked violence in other English cities.

Cameron, who returned from holiday abroad last week after days of unrest, is seeking to tap into widespread public anger over the violence. They came 15 months after he took office at the head of a centre-right coalition committed to cuts in welfare and other spending that critics say will hit the poor.

"I think he's right," Nicola Pastore, 26, told Reuters as she pushed a pram in Tottenham. "I don't think the police have enough control. My kids are scared to go to sleep at night."

Cameron, who faces criticism for plans to cut spending on police and for his management of the crisis, said the riots had been a "wake-up call" for Britain, whose reputation abroad was tarnished by the images of groups rampaging through its cities.

Behind him as he spoke was a graffiti-style mural centred on characters in the kind of hoods and masks worn by many looters.

The stakes are high for Cameron. Any repeat of last week's lawlessness, in which shops were smashed and set on fire and five people died, will sap public confidence in his government.

However, analysts say the 44-year-old premier, a former public relations executive from a wealthy establishment background, could benefit politically if he provides the tough law and order response some voters are seeking.

Cameron has taken a hard line in rhetoric. His speech today talked of the dangers of indiscipline in schools and family breakdown, succour to traditional Conservatives who feel their young leader has been too liberal on social issues.

Cameron and his centre-left Liberal Democrat coalition partners will review their programme over the coming weeks, looking at issues like welfare and substance addiction in an effort to promote more stable communities.

But the prime minister has ruled out easing spending cuts which some critics on the left say are fuelling tensions in Britain's cities, where the gap between rich and poor is gaping.

Planned austerity has put Cameron on a collision course with the police, still smarting over his criticism of their initial response to the riots. Police chiefs say a 20% cut in their budget over the next four years will make it harder for them to maintain law and order.

London's Conservative mayor, Boris Johnson, has also said now is not the time for cuts to spending on police.

But Cameron has refused to budge on plans to ease austerity measures, believing jittery financial markets will take fright at any sign of backtracking on plans to erase by 2015 a budget deficit that peaked at over 10% of national output.

At Witney Ecumenical Youth Trust, where Cameron gave his speech, young people questioned how spending cuts squared with his plans to deal with social problems, and felt his speech created even more of a sense of 'them and us'.

Cameron was subjected to hostile whistling on arrival. After his televised speech, he took questions from journalists until a reporter chided him for not responding directly to young people in the audience. The prime minister later left to the sounds of hecklers clucking like chickens to accuse him of cowardice.

"He tried putting it across like everyone who's had a broken family was wrong. It's like he's having a dig at us," said Jesse Day, 19. She and her friends stressed the importance of community organisations like theirs – a charity which relies on donations and which almost closed a few months ago.

"He says he wants people to get in touch with their families. But for some people, their families aren't there and the youth centre's the only people to talk to," said Ryan Clayton, 15. "But he's shutting all the youth centres."

Others in Witney welcomed Cameron's emphasis on behaviour.

"I agree entirely," said 74-year-old Colin Bayliss.

"Discipline's gone out the window. The family identity has gone out the window. There's more single parents around. More people need to take responsibility for their families and their children."

Opposition Labour leader Ed Miliband said a lack of morality was not confined to a "feral underclass" but was also displayed by risk-taking bankers, legislators who fiddled their expenses and newspaper reporters who hacked telephones for stories – all major topics of debate in Britain in the past couple of years.

"When we talk about the sick behaviour of those without power, let's also talk about the sick behaviour of those with it," he said in a speech at his old school in London today.

It was a line echoed by Cameron. Leaders are conscious that voters, disillusioned by what many see as a failure to punish bankers they hold responsible for the financial crisis, could take unkindly to being lectured by politicians, the press and police, all institutions hit by scandal in the recent past. – Reuters

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