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Biden balances anti-crime and reform agendas in message to police

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'Must all work together' to address hate -Biden on Buffalo

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Reuters) - U.S. President Joe Biden said on Sunday that police officers must deliver both effective crime deterrence and equal justice in a message that balanced two fraught political priorities as his law-enforcement reforms have stalled.

Speaking at a memorial service at the U.S. Capitol for 563 officers who died in the line of duty over the prior year, Biden offered no new indications over how he would resolve a delay in police reform aimed at holding officers to a higher standard after high-profile killings of unarmed Black people.

Instead, he answered swirling concerns about rising street violence in an election year by saying there was no tension between reforming law enforcement and deterring crime.

"Folks, the answer is not to abandon the streets; it's not to choose between safety and equal justice," Biden said.

"And we should agree it's not to defund the police - it's to fund the police. Fund them with the resources, the training they need to protect our communities and themselves and restore trust."

The remarks came as authorities investigated the shooting of 10 people in a Black neighborhood grocery store in Buffalo, New York, as a hate crime. read more "We must all work together to address the hate that remains a stain on the soul of America," Biden said.

It is also just two years shy of the anniversary of George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis police custody on May 25, 2020, which inspired mass protests around the country.

Biden promised Floyd's family - and voters - that he would take action but bipartisan congressional talks on a bill stalled last year. A Democrat-backed bill named for Floyd that passed the House of Representatives in 2020 would have limited officers' use of chokeholds and held them to higher legal standards for rights violations.

U.S. President Joe Biden delivers remarks at the annual National Peace Officers' Memorial Service at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, U.S. May 15, 2022.

REUTERS/Elizabeth Frantz

"We haven't gotten there yet," Biden said. "We must get there to strengthen public trust and public safety.

He said police groups have played a "constructive" role in reform discussions and said he is "committed to being your partner, as I always have."

The remarks showed the balancing act faced by Biden as the country heads in to November's election for control of Congress. His party needs strong support from communities outraged by police violence and those frightened by crime.

Biden aides are drafting a narrower executive order on policing that the president hopes to sign soon, officials have said, after months of internal negotiations.

Biden has been a loyal ally to law enforcement, dating back to his days in the Senate when he crafted a 1994 crime bill with their help.

But his support for broad reforms following the 2020 murder of Floyd by an officer created some tension with police unions opposed to some of the reforms promoted by Democrats. Those groups include the National Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), which sponsored Sunday's event.

The National Peace Officers' Memorial Service began in 1982 as a small gathering of approximately 120 survivors and supporters of law enforcement. It has since turned into a series of events, attracting thousands of officers and the families of victims to the nation's capital each year.

The number of officers dying at work has increased sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, data from police groups shows.

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