

Axel Rudakubana's Southport murders: Who bears responsibility?

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28 January 2025

Axel Rudakubana, an 18-year-old youth who brutally murdered three young children and seriously wounded 10 others at a Taylor Swift themed dance class on July 29, 2024 in Southport, England, was sentenced to 52 years imprisonment last Thursday—the longest ever sentence handed down to a young offender.

Rudakubana was 17 at the time of the killings, nine days short of his 18th birthday. He admitted killing Bebe King, 6, Elsie Dot Stancombe, 7, and Alice da Silva Aguiar, 9. He also pleaded guilty to the attempted murder of eight other children, class instructor Leanne Lucas and businessman John Hayes.

Due to his admission of guilt, Rudakubana did not go to trial. While there is still much unanswered regarding the tragic case, what is known and clear is the total failure and breakdown of the state services which should have engaged with Rudakubana—a deeply troubled child with serious mental health issues—long before he committed his crime. He was allowed, repeatedly, to “fall through the cracks”.

Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government, in the face of public horror over the Southport killings and demands for answers, announced an immediate inquiry. It will be like all government inquiries that have preceded it: a total cover-up aimed at diverting and manipulating public opinion behind a right-wing “law and order” campaign. Starmer has already pointed the way—toughening sentences for young people and expanding already draconian “terrorism” laws.

Who was Axel Rudakubana?

The facts which the inquiry will obscure but which must form the basis for preventing future tragedies of this kind are as follows.

Axel Rudakubana appeared to be a healthy and happy young child who was born in 2007 in Wales. His parents were from Rwanda, from the Tutsi ethnic group. His father, Alphonse, was a serving officer in the Rwandan Patriotic Army. They moved to neighbouring Uganda when the first signs of ethnic conflict emerged in Rwanda—growing out the divisions implemented under Belgian imperialism—which would later to erupt into a civil war and an ensuing genocide of the Tutsi population in 1994.

Roughly one million people were killed, and hundreds of thousands raped, in the space of just 100 days.

The Rudakubanas moved to Wales in 2002. Alphonse was offered a job in Southport in 2017 and the family moved just as Axel was starting high school. He struggled to fit in and was bullied. His

behaviour became increasingly violent and he showed many signs of mental distress. He first became known to officials in 2019, initially due to anxiety and social isolation and then for increasing concerns over his behaviour.

He was known to have an “infatuation” with genocide and those who had worked with him have stated that he had extremely detailed knowledge of mass killings and genocides from Genghis Khan to Hitlerite fascism and the close-to-home events in Rwanda. It was also noted he had an interest in “current” genocides—likely an oblique reference to the crimes against the Palestinians being carried out by Israel.

On October 4, 2019, aged 13, Axel contacted Childline and asked, “What should I do if I want to kill somebody?” In the following days, he explained he wanted to kill someone who was bullying him at school. The incident was referred to the police, who visited him shortly afterwards. Rudakubana had been temporarily excluded by this point, and he was expelled after he disclosed that he had taken a knife to school on about 10 occasions.

He was sent to a specialist behaviour unit to continue his education and then to a third school for behavioural difficulties. Throughout this time, there were several more callouts to the police, and he was referred to the government's counter-terrorism Prevent programme.

One police call was made by his school in 2019, amid concerns over his behaviour and searches about mass shootings. He was flagged again in February 2021 after a fellow pupil raised concerns about social media posts about the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi—lynched by imperialist proxy forces in 2011.

A third referral was made in April 2021, after a teacher saw he was using a school computer to research the 2017 London Bridge terror attack, which saw eight killed and 48 injured by an Islamist terror group.

His parents asked police four times for help with the teen to cope with Axel's violent behaviour, but to no effect. Just a week before he launched his deadly attack, Rudakubana booked a taxi to take him to one of his previous schools, Range High School; his father stopped him from leaving as he believed he would carry out a violent assault.

Rudakubana was also under the supervision of a National Health Service (NHS) mental health unit and social services. Alder Hey Children's NHS Foundation Trust confirmed he had been in its care between 2019 and 2023 before he “stopped engaging”. There is no evidence that the Trust attempted to visit or assess the state of Rudakubana in the year leading up to the killings. He was diagnosed as being on the Autism Spectrum.

Local authority social workers would insist on a police officer being present at their meetings with him.

The social causes of individual violence

Starmer's inquiry will not address the problems of understaffing, underfunding and overwork in the NHS, social services and schools which prevented them from intervening effectively to shift Rudakubana from the path he was on. Nor will it pose the question: what are the psychological pressures at work in today's society which drove him down that path in the first place?

As well as the traumatic conditions of his family's flight from Rwanda, Axel is part of a generation which has not lived a day in which the United Kingdom has not been at war or supporting it—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Ukraine and Palestine to name just some. How did scenes of the ongoing Gaza genocide—backed by the UK and other imperialist governments—interact with knowledge of his family's past in Rwanda?

The child's mental illness escalated during the COVID pandemic and lockdown, when he increasingly turned in on himself. The lack of support provided to families undergoing the psychological strain of isolation combined with the daily examples of a total disregard for life—the government's eugenicist-based policy of allowing the "bodies to pile high"—would have weighed enormously on his psyche.

When a system insists that there is no money for education, mental health services, basic health care or any semblance of a social safety net, but billions are channelled to fund war—where the rich profit off the misery and exploitation of the working class—it is not difficult to see how millions are pushed to a psychological breaking point. Conditions of social despair and alienation produce waves of drug abuse, depression, anxiety and suicide. In the most extreme cases, they also produce homicidal outbursts such as in Southport.

Labour's "law and order" response

It is not just that Labour has no plan to address these issues; it is actively worsening them. At the same time, Rudakubana's case and conviction is being used for the most reactionary purposes.

There have been widespread appeals by politicians on both sides of the Houses of Parliament and in the mass media to overturn the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child which states that "neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below 18 years of age".

Southport's Labour MP Patrick Hurley said the 52 year sentence was "unduly lenient" and requested the government review it. Rupert Lowe, an MP of the far-right Reform UK said it was "time for a national debate on the use of the death penalty in exceptional circumstances. This is an exceptional circumstance". Fellow Reform MP Lee Anderson posted a picture of a hangman's noose, captioned, "This is what is required."

These are repugnant efforts to deflect attention away from the deeper social causes of Rudakubana's crime and to implement barbaric new laws which can then be turned against a wider range of

targets.

Starmer has meanwhile announced that the government will review anti-terrorism legislation to include "lone actors, misfits" who may have no adherence to any specific ideology, but who commit crimes against society which could be brought under anti-terror laws. He claims Britain is facing a new threat from "young men in their bedrooms" accessing radical materials online and that "Terrorism has changed".

Mr. Justice Goose, who sentenced Rudakubana, said he "must accept" there was no evidence he acted for a terrorist cause, but added that the child's actions were the "equivalent" of terrorist murders.

A review instigated by the previous government of Prevent, carried out by William Shawcross in 2023, concluded that the scheme had become a dumping ground for vulnerable people who do not fit the terrorist definition but are, in Starmer's words, "loners and misfits".

What this highlights is that Prevent—brought in under Tony Blair's Labour government—is less interested in understanding and stopping violence than demonising Muslims and providing the pretext for state surveillance and anti-democratic laws. Rather than scrapping the scheme, as should be done, Starmer wants to extend its remit, redefining terrorism laws to target vulnerable young people for whose distress it has no progressive solution.

Labour's actions build on their initial response to the Southport killings and the days that followed, which saw anti-immigration riots across the country based on false claims that the girls had been murdered by a Muslim asylum seeker. Pogrom-like attacks were launched on mosques and migrant accommodation.

Starmer's government responded by emphasising "legitimate concerns" over migration, ramping up rhetoric against asylum seekers crossing the Channel in small boats, and carrying out record deportations. Ministers also announced a raft of new law-and-order measures, including a national policing unit "to tackle violent disorder", nominally targeting the far-right but in reality, as ever, preparing a crackdown on social opposition from the left.

Many of the far-right rioters have since been given prison sentences shorter than those handed down to peaceful climate protesters and faced by opponents of Israel's genocide in Gaza.

A social and morally bankrupt capitalist system will continue to produce all manner of barbarism, from war crimes to ethnic cleansing. In some vulnerable individuals, these malignant forces will find a terrible and violent outlet.

The answer is not more draconian legislation, which will only be used to safeguard warmongering, pro-austerity governments. The problem must be tackled at its root by putting an end to social inequality and imperialist violence, expropriating the parasitic oligarchy—which requires the building of an international socialist movement of the working class.



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