

## SHYAM BHATIA and ARLEN HARRIS report on British families who live in fear

# New group to combat race attacks

A NEW organisation to fight racism in Britain has been established in the wake of escalating violence against Asian homes and businesses.

Anti **Fascist Action**, which claims 4,000 supporters, aims to pool information about race attacks and encourage the formation of self-defence groups among black and Asian communities.

A wave of recent arson attacks, which began in London's East End but is now spreading to other areas, has led to fears of an organised campaign of intimidation against the Asian community.

The latest attack was against an Indian restaurant in central London. It followed a recent pattern in which petrol or some other inflammable liquid has been set alight after being poured through a letter box.

Police say they are considering a racial motive for the fire which started in the hallway of the Tandoor Mahal restaurant. The owner of the restaurant, Mohammed Khalique, raised the alarm when the fire started. Four people were taken to hospital.

**Anti Fascist Action**, which was established at a conference of community representatives and anti-racist workers in London five weeks ago, is seen as a successor to the **Anti Nazi League** which successfully combatted the actions of the National Front in the late 1970s.

The major force in establishing the movement has been the black and Asian community in London's East End, together with minority groups in Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle.

A spokesman for **Anti Fascist Action** said: 'In the past three years there has been a steady increase in the number of organised race attacks and we felt there was a need for an organised opposition.'

'We aim to build a popular movement to fight racism and fascism and we want to attract support from as wide a social base as possible, free of party political involvement.'

In the weeks following its formation, there have been at least four serious arson attacks against Asians:

- The Miah family were rescued from their home in Electric House, Bow, after petrol was poured through their letter box and set alight;
- Mahmood Kayani, his wife Mumtaz and 12 others escaped after petrol was poured through their letter box and set alight;
- Four people had to jump from a first floor window above an Indian restaurant in Bromley, Kent, after a petrol bomb was thrown through the ground floor windows;
- A man was robbed and locked in his home, which was then set alight. Layhan Kerai, of Hendon, north London, was treated in hospital for cuts and bruises.

The most serious attack claimed the lives of a young Asian mother and her children. Mrs Shamira Kassam and her three small children were the victims of another petrol fire that started at their front door in Seven Kings, Ilford.

Concerned Asian community groups are convinced the attacks have been inspired by racial hatred. They say the police have been slow in responding to the violence which may have been organised by members of an extreme right-wing group.

Sunder Kangesan, of the Newham Monitoring Project in east London, said: 'Many attacks have been well planned. The police are not reacting quickly or taking them seriously enough.'

Mr Kangesan has only circumstantial evidence to back up his theory of organised right-wing attacks against the Asian community, but he has come across at least one hitherto unknown organisation — The Exterminators — which is active in the borough.

Searchlight, the anti-Fascist magazine, says death threats signed 'The Exterminators' have been sent to black families in Canning Town, Newham.

According to Commander Lawrence Roach, head of the Metropolitan Police Community Relations Branch, the attacks so far have been 'random' and 'opportunistic.' There is no evidence that they were organised by a new secret organisation.

At a meeting last week with six Labour MPs, Mr Roach said the police alone could not solve the problem of racial attacks. They stemmed from a deeper problem of racial prejudice in society.

Police say, however, that they are trying to monitor racial attacks more carefully and experiments to improve this process are being carried out in five police districts.

Plaistow police station is part of 'K' district in Newham, where police officers are asked to log each racial incident on a special form. Notes attached to the form instruct officers to 'make special efforts to adopt a sympathetic and understanding approach to victims.'

Inside the police station a map of the area is used to pinpoint the nature and frequency of every racial incident, ranging from verbal abuse to physical attack. Blue, yellow and orange pins indicate the frequency of incidents and whether they took place on the street or at home.

A follow-up scheme means that victims of racial harassment at home get at least two visits from their home beat officer. Chief Inspector Victor Young who is stationed at Plaistow said: 'Neighbours should see this and realise the police are concerned.'



Jasmin Khalique. She escaped restaurant blaze.

'It's quite a hard environment here. Militant white families sometimes make it difficult for coloured families moving into the area.'

According to Insp Young, racial incidents this year have included arson attacks. 'Ninety-nine per cent are carried out by young children. Hopefully, we can halt this trend. The last thing we want is serious arson.'

But this police approach has been criticised as inadequate by members of Newham Monitoring Project. Mr Kangesan said: 'The whole structure of reporting racial incidents and racial awareness training is an attempt to marginalise basic crimes.'

These sentiments are shared by CAPA, the police monitoring group in the neighbouring borough of Tower Hamlets. A spokesman for the group said: 'The police appear to believe that recording racial incidents is an excuse for not catching the criminals. The problem is one of law and order with the police apparently unwilling to enforce the law when crimes are committed against black people.'

Attacks on Asians living in Tower Hamlets have been at least as frequent as in Newham. According to CAPA there has been a qualitative change for the worse in the attacks. A spokesman said: 'We are now dealing with organised, well planned attacks as experienced by families in Newham.'

Geydun Bibi a Bangladeshi woman, lives with her four children in a council flat on the Lincoln estate in Tower Hamlets. She has stopped going out on her own for fear of being spat at or being taunted with slogans. She has had fire crackers pushed through the letter box and last Christmas a fire was started in the rubbish chute next to the flat.

Asian concern that the police are not doing enough to help vulnerable families has led in some areas to the formation of self-help or 'protection' groups.

In Waltham Forest, North East London, where the Pakistan Welfare Society has logged more than 20 arson attacks in the past four years, neighbours keep a watchful eye on each other at weekends.

'It's quite harmless really,' said Dr Zafar Malik, the GP who heads the society. 'On Fridays and Saturdays usually there are some people available at the end of a telephone. They will come out and show solidarity if someone is being threatened. That frightens off would-be attackers.'