

Australia: Investigation to be conducted into police violence against anti-WEF protesters

Our correspondent
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Investigations into police violence are being established by the Victorian state ombudsman after 50 people were hospitalised and more than 400 injured during protests against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne two weeks ago.

More than 2,000 police were mobilised to guard the Crown Casino, where the forum was being held, after weeks of sensationalised media coverage predicting violent protests. Huge concrete and steel barricades were erected to prevent demonstrators from getting anywhere near the venue, while surrounding streets were completely blocked off.

On Monday September 11, the first day of the protest, several thousand demonstrators succeeded in blockading the seven entrances to the casino. As a result some 200 WEF delegates failed to gain entry, with police forced to turn back several buses.

Prime Minister John Howard, the US ambassador and a Japanese parliamentarian were forced to travel to the casino by police launch, across the Yarra River, while mining magnate Hugh Morgan flew in by helicopter, landing on the casino's helipad, to avoid the blockade.

Furious at the diplomatic loss of face, Victorian state Premier Steve Bracks attacked the demonstrators, saying they were “absolutely disgraceful” and “deserved the criticism of all Australians.” “It is not acceptable in the way we operate in Australia,” he declared. In a radio interview he went on: “I regret the fact that not every delegate has had access, but the majority have been here and (we) are working currently on ensuring that the rest of the delegates are here as soon as possible. And that's happening right now”.

In an openly provocative move, Western Australian state premier, Richard Court defied police instructions and attempted to drive his limousine through the crowd. When demonstrators blocked the car, spraying its sides

with paint, police swooped in with batons flying, injuring several people. One young man lost three teeth and had to undergo facial reconstruction surgery. But the incident was then used to accuse the protesters of violence and raise demands for tougher police action.

“It was that typical mob mentality,” Court declared. “What is sad is that a relatively small group of rabble can send an image around the world of a country”.

Victoria's opposition leader Denis Napthine, who was also prevented from attending, condemned police for being “too hands off”.

On the Monday evening, WEF president Klaus Schwab warned the government that the demonstrations would degrade Australia's image and Howard denounced them as “mad, senseless violence.” Other politicians attacked the protesters for being “un-Australian”.

The news media chimed in, with a Channel Seven television report characterising the day's events as “blood on the streets of Melbourne”. Channel Ten reported a “day of violence”, while the headline on Tuesday morning's Age newspaper read “Battle of Melbourne”. Neil Mitchell, a 3AW radio commentator, insisted that the police had been “a bit gun-shy”. Nevertheless, the only violence depicted in video footage of the day's events was the police baton attack carried out during Court's provocation.

The following morning the demonstration was considerably smaller. With no advance warning, 500 members of the Riot Squad descended on about 40 protesters blockading one of the casino's entrances, chanting “You're going to get hurt, you're going to get hurt”. Legal observers estimate that 90 percent of officers removed their identity badges as they cleared a path for WEF delegates.

Scores of protesters were beaten, punched and kicked,

with injuries ranging from a punctured lung to concussion. Two *Age* photographers were thrown to the ground.

Most of the injuries resulted from officers bashing demonstrators around the head with police batons. A young protester was run over by a police car after she became pinned under its wheels. An AAP journalist who witnessed the incident said, “I saw the car rise up and come back down with a loud thump”, yet the police failed to stop.

These tactics were repeated on Tuesday evening and again on Wednesday. Commenting on the conduct of police, a first-aid volunteer told the media: “The force police used was very excessive. The head traumas that we saw were unbelievable—so many split heads”.

Claude Smadja, managing director of the WEF, applauded the police response, declaring: “I don't have any sympathy for activists using undemocratic methods. No sympathy whatsoever...if their people are obstructing law and order, then these are the risks involved.”

New South Wales Labor Premier Bob Carr labeled the protesters “bully-boy fascists” for blocking access to the venue, a term later taken up by Premier Bracks, who backed the police violence with the comment that demonstrators “deserve everything they got”.

After the protest, as hundreds of demonstrators began filing complaints of police brutality, Bracks publicly endorsed the police actions, declaring the cops had done “a sterling and outstanding job.” Preempting the findings of the ombudsman's inquiry he commended the police for showing “extraordinary restraint”. As a debt of gratitude, he offered a day off for all officers involved, and announced that the government would provide the “necessary resources” to assist their defence against any legal action.

The premier also announced a state reception for the police in the grounds of Parliament House. It had to be cancelled, however, due to a groundswell of public opposition.



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