

Canada mounts biggest-ever security operation for Summit of the Americas

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The Summit of the Americas, which will be held in Quebec City April 20-22, has become the object of the largest security operation in Canadian history. While much of this operation is cloaked in secrecy, flagrant violations of basic civil liberties have already come to light. Moreover, by transforming Quebec City into an armed camp, the authorities hope to marginalize and stigmatize opposition to the summit and to the big business agenda pursued by its 34 participating governments.

Publicly, government officials are admitting that 5,000 police drawn from four different police forces—the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Quebec Provincial Police and the municipal police forces of Quebec City and neighboring Ste.-Foy—will be mobilized for the summit. The police will be charged with keeping protesters quarantined far from the summit site and ruthlessly suppressing any transgression of the law by the summit's opponents. To this end, all five of the RCMP's riot control detachments are being deployed to Quebec City and the Quebec provincial government has ordered that 500 inmates be temporarily transferred from a local prison, so it can serve as a detention centre for persons arrested during anti-summit protests.

The authorities are taking extraordinary steps to ensure that the most lowly summit participants, let alone US President George W. Bush and the 33 other state presidents and prime ministers who are slated to attend, do not encounter or even come within earshot of any anti-summit protests. The downtown core of Quebec City—an area of several dozen blocks that contains the summit meeting site and the hotels where the participants are to be housed, as well as numerous shops, office, and residences—is to be fortified and transformed into an exclusion zone.

A 4.5 kilometre-long and 3-metre high metal fence anchored in concrete will be built around this entire area and during the summit only those with police passes will be permitted entry. Three types of passes are being issued: one for those attending the summit, another for those who live within the exclusion zone and a third for those who work in the zone. Depending on whether the Quebec government decides to give civil servants who work at the provincial legislature and the various ministries that are likewise situated in the no-go zone a holiday for the duration of the summit, up to 25,000 workers and residents will be compelled to obtain police passes and have their movements monitored during the summit.

The police are conducting security checks on those requesting passes for the exclusion zone. Bibiane Bernier, manager of a souvenir store at a hotel where some summit-related activities are to take place, told the Canadian Press that the RCMP have been carrying out detailed security checks on the store's employees. "They called one of our employees who'd moved five times in recent years, and asked, 'What were you doing? Why did you move?'"

These measures have been defended by Quebec's Security Minister in stark terms. "As the proverb goes," Serge Menard told reporters, "if you want peace, prepare for war."

Civil liberties groups have pointed out that the exclusion-zone represents an unprecedented constraint on people's right to use city streets and other public places. Canadian Civil Liberties Association general counsel Alan Borovoy added, "The further the protesters are, the less viable their protest will be."

The RCMP have visited organizations involved in anti-summit activities, including church groups, to question them about their plans and to encourage them

to inform on any group or individual they suspect might disobey the police's strict rules as to where protests will be permitted and how protestors must act. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service has also been paying unannounced visits to anti-summit activists.

These pressure tactics have already had one desired outcome. Eager to demonstrate to the establishment their respectability, the trade unions have announced that their protest demonstration will be staged well away from the perimeter of the exclusion-zone.

In the run-up to the summit, the local police and government are seeking to instill a climate of fear and intimidation. On at least two occasions, police have detained persons handing out anti-summit materials in the Quebec City area. In the first case, police said that if more than two people distributed materials together they would be considered an unlawful assembly. This week, the suburb of Ste.-Foy followed the lead of Quebec City and passed a municipal bylaw that makes it illegal for anyone in a crowd to wear a mask, scarf or otherwise cover any part of their face, and this in a city where sub-freezing temperatures are a common occurrence in late April. Not only does the Ste.-Foy bylaw give the police the power to immediately arrest anyone even partially covering his or her face, it overturns the presumption of innocence and says that those who obscure any part of their face must prove that they did so for a valid reason.

Such draconian measures point to the authorities' hostility to basic civil liberties and eagerness to give the state powers that can be invoked so as to justify clearing the streets of those opposed to government policy.

With the full support of Canada's Liberal government, the United States intends to use next month's summit to reinforce its longstanding economic and geopolitical domination of Latin America by pushing for the creation of a hemispheric free trade zone.



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