

Summit of the Americas: security operation turns Quebec City into an armed camp

Keith Jones
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This weekend's Summit of the Americas has been made the object of a massive security operation whose purpose goes far beyond protecting US President George W. Bush, the 33 other heads of government attending the summit, and their entourages.

Quebec City has been transformed into an armed camp. According to police spokesmen, 6,700 police, 1,200 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel and hundreds of customs officers are participating in the summit security operation. Up to 3,000 additional military personnel have been stationed at a CAF base in the suburb of Valcartier and stand ready for possible deployment.

A large prison has been evacuated, so it can be used to incarcerate any anti-summit protesters who run afoul of the police.

The police have been equipped with water cannon, attack dogs, tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullet guns. And they have begun using them. After protesters toppled a tiny section of the chain-metal fence that encircles a large area ordered off-limits to anyone without summit security authorization, the police responded with a massive show of force, firing rubber bullets and volley after volley of tear gas.

Months in the planning, the 3.8 kilometer metal-chain fence is embedded in concrete blocks and encircles a 10-square kilometer area of Quebec City's downtown. Shortly after midday Thursday, the police began enforcing the no-go zone, limiting access to those with special summit photo identification cards. Those who live in the area or who work at the conference site or at the hotels where summit participants are being housed have been given IDs, but only after undergoing extensive police security checks.

The imposition of the no-go zone came hours earlier than previously announced, forcing the evacuation of

thousands of civil servants who work in the downtown core, but for whom the Quebec government decided not to seek security clearances. Asked the reason for advancing the imposition of the security perimeter a police spokesman declared, "For strategic reasons, we decided to [act].... We found there was a critical mass of protesters in the perimeter."

Police surveillance and action are by no means limited to the area in and around the perimeter. Helicopters are patrolling the entire Quebec City region, while police intelligence officers are systematically checking the guest lists of area hotels and in some cases asking to search guests' baggage.

Customs and Immigration officers have been instructed to closely question anyone whom they suspect might be headed for Quebec City and to refuse entry to anyone with a criminal record or whose peaceful intent they question. Even two of the principal organizers of the Peoples' Summit, a counter-summit to which the Canadian and Quebec governments contributed half a million dollars, were subject to lengthy interrogations when they arrived in Canada.

Ostensibly for security reasons, all of Quebec City's CEGEPs (junior colleges) were closed Friday, as were many public schools. The real reason for the closure was to preempt student efforts to organize a strike in protest against the summit and the proposed Free Trade of the Americas Agreement.

There is no question that the government and police, with the support of the corporate media, have sought to create a climate of fear and panic around the summit. They have a double purpose: first to paint any and all opposition to the right-wing big business agenda of the Summit of the Americas and the 34 participating governments as irrational, if not violent; second, through a massive display of state power to

demonstrate capital's resolve and its readiness to use force and run roughshod over democratic rights in pursuit of its objectives.

In the weeks preceding the summit, police and government spokesmen sought to justify repeated increases in the size and scope of the security operation by claiming they had intelligence reports of plans to disrupt the summit. Declared the director-general of the Quebec Provincial Police, "You would have to be naïve to think that there is not a threat hanging over the Quebec City Summit."

As if to order, police held a press conference on Wednesday to announce that they had thwarted a plot to use explosives to attack the summit. The following morning, newspapers across Canada made the story their front-page lead.

Typical was the report that appeared in the *Globe and Mail*. Headlined "Police arrest six in summit plot," it began: "Quebec police and the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] say they have thwarted a plan by a violent cell of activists to use explosives to disrupt this weekend's Summit of the Americas in Quebec City."

But it soon emerged that the explosives were smoke bombs and army "thunder flashes," harmless devices which simulate grenade explosions by making a firecracker-like bang and a flash of light.

Seven young men between the ages of 19 and 23 face a total of 17 criminal charges, including conspiracy to cause life-threatening mischief. A spokesperson for the ad hoc group to which the youths belong has accused the police of vastly exaggerating their purported arsenal and deliberately misconstruing their aims, saying their intention was merely to break through the security perimeter.

That the timing of the youths' arrests was politically motivated and the charges against them are a frame-up is underscored by the fact that the police concede that they have had the group under surveillance for months. Two of the seven have connections to the military—one is a CAF reservist, the other a former soldier—which must raise a question as to whether the entire escapade was not a police provocation.



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