

Mass arrests at anti-IMF protest in Washington

Kate Randall
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Over 600 demonstrators were arrested Friday in Washington DC during the first day of protests against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, which are holding their annual meetings beginning this Sunday in the nation's capital. The local authorities, egged on by the Bush administration and backed by the media, effectively suspended constitutional rights for those seeking to express their opposition to globalization and to the impending US military attack on Iraq.

District of Columbia police chief Charles Ramsey mobilized an unprecedented number of cops, more than 3,000 in all, heavily outnumbering the nonviolent demonstrators. Of the 649 people reported arrested by early evening, only five were charged with destruction of property, while all the others were charged with parading without a permit or failing to obey police orders to disperse.

Finance ministers of the Group of 7 (G-7)—representing the US, Canada, Japan, France, Britain, Germany and Italy—were meeting on Friday in advance of the IMF-World Bank meetings. They convened behind a fortress of fences and security guards and their activities proceeded as planned. The area around the World Bank building was cordoned off with iron crowd-control barriers.

Protesting groups included the Anti-Capitalist Convergence, the Mobilization for Global Justice and other anti-globalization, environmental and peace organizations. They carried banners reading “Biodiversity,” “Clean Energy Now,” “End Corporate Greed” and “Drop Bush, Not Bombs”—a reference to the Bush administration's plans for war against Iraq.

Only about a thousand demonstrators turned out Friday in heavy rain, although 10,000 or more were expected for Saturday's and Sunday's protests. A force

about 1,500 DC police officers was reinforced by about 1,700 additional cops, including from nearby communities and some as far away as Chicago.

While in some recent DC protests police have moved more cautiously against protesters, this time they donned riot gear and moved swiftly to lock them up. Demonstrators were kept several blocks from the location of the IMF and World Bank meetings and the White House. In a number of cases, protesters were corralled by police, unable to escape.

Witnesses reported seeing police dragging away some screaming, masked protesters—who insisted they had broken no laws—as well as beating demonstrators with their clubs. Protesters, some chaining themselves together, chanted, “This is not a police state, we have a right to demonstrate.” Some set fire to tires and set up make-shift stages for protests.

DC Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey emphasized the aim of police to arrest as many protesters as possible. “The intent of this group is to shut down all DC,” he commented. If they are not locked up, he said, “they leave here and go someplace else and do something else.... Those people that are apprehended will be missing several protests because they are going to be behind bars.” Ramsey warned demonstrators that anyone caught damaging property would be jailed.

Troopers were stationed at each of the bridges connecting Washington and Virginia. The first arrests came around 7.a.m, when police took about 21 protesters into custody for lying in the road at 14th Street and Independence Avenue, near the 14th Street bridge.

About an hour later, some 300 protesters who had marched from Franklin Square to K Street and Vermont Avenue were surrounded by police in riot gear. A few demonstrators allegedly threw rocks at a Citibank

building, breaking windows. About 40 protesters were then surrounded by police, marched onto nearby buses and carted off to be booked for arrest. One protester was reportedly hit by a baton in the nose, and was treated and released at a local hospital.

A bicycle-ride protest of about 75, planned to disrupt commuter traffic, took off from Union Station at about 8 a.m. At least an equal number of police followed the protesters on bicycles, motorcycles and cars. After riding through the downtown area without incident, protesters were stopped by police at Pershing Park, near the White House, where they were joined by a few hundred others.

Police on foot, bicycle and horseback formed a tight ring around the protesters at both Pershing Park and Freedom Plaza, refusing to allow the activists to leave. Some passersby were also caught up in the police encirclement.

Two to three hundred protesters were arrested after they staged a drumming protest against a possible attack on Iraq in a park nearby the White House. By noon at least 500 had been arrested in protests around the city. Demonstrators were loaded onto Metro buses and transported to police facilities to be processed.

Both of Washington's daily newspapers published editorials supporting a police crackdown on demonstrators in the week before the protests. The right-wing *Washington Times* issued a predictably frothing diatribe against "the Anti-Capitalist Convergence and other hooligans," criticizing Chief Ramsey for not prohibiting the demonstrators from entering the city. Ramsey should be "thinking of ways to shut them down before they can cause any trouble," the newspaper declared.

More significant was the editorial in the *Washington Post*, headlined, "No shutdown for D,c" and published on the eve of the protests. "For a city already reeling from the economic downturn and the impact of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on its tourist trade, disruption of downtown business would further set back the District's chances of recovery," the *Post* commented. "That's all the more reason for the authorities to take appropriate action to ensure that Washington does not become a city that is besieged and sacked this weekend."

The swift and repressive response of the police in DC to what was by all accounts a small and relatively

peaceful protest is an indication of the measures being prepared against those who speak out against government policy. In line with the anti-democratic measures which have been enacted in the wake of September 11 in the "war on terrorism," future demonstrators against the Bush administration's economic policies—or its plans for war against Iraq—can expect a similar response.



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