

Massive security crackdown at Prague NATO summit

Our own correspondent
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The NATO summit scheduled to take place this week, November 21-22, in the Czech capital of Prague has been accompanied by a massive security operation. For the first time, a NATO summit will take place in a country that once formed part of the dismantled Soviet bloc. Forty-six heads of state are expected to attend, including US President George W. Bush.

An army of some 20,000 advisors and officials will accompany the heads of state for two days of talks at the Prague congress centre. The main items on the agenda are the expansion of NATO to include a number of additional Eastern European countries, and the establishment of new NATO combat forces. Against the background of a growing threat of war against Iraq and simmering tensions between Europe and the US, conference organisers are determined to avoid any disruption by anti-war and anti-NATO demonstrators.

Two years ago, large anti-globalization demonstrations forced delegates attending the IMF conference in Prague to break off their proceedings and go home early. Czech officials and conference organisers, working closely with American intelligence and NATO military command structures, have gone to enormous lengths to ensure there will be no repeat of the embarrassing events of autumn 2000.

In justifying the enormous security precautions, Czech politicians and the media have created a climate of fear around the conference. Gabriela Bartikova of the Czech Interior Ministry warned that precautions were necessary because of the potential for terrorist attacks. The head of the Czech chancellery told the Prague daily *Pravo* that those in charge of the conference were proceeding on the basis that possible acts of terrorism could involve weapons of mass destruction.

More than 12,000 police, including 3,000

commandos (SEK), will control the streets of Prague. The police and troops have already undergone extensive training at special camps, rehearsing for clashes with demonstrators. Snipers have selected prime positions on city rooftops and will be operating throughout the week. The Czech army is installing rocket launchers in strategic positions as an additional precaution. Police are also planning to temporarily close Prague's main thoroughfare, which passes close by the Congress centre, thus preventing demonstrators from nearing the complex.

Referring to the disturbances of two years ago, Czech Interior Minister Stanislav Gross declared that his troops "will not allow themselves to be beaten this time around."

American intelligence and military forces have heavily reinforced Czech security precautions. In recent months, top US officials have chided European governments for investing inadequate resources in military budgets.

In an ostentatious display of the overwhelming superiority enjoyed by the US in the sphere of military technology, American F-16 and F-15 fighter-bombers backed by an AWACS command-and-control radar plane will guard the airspace over the summit. According to Radio Prague, the US has also provided free of charge to the Czech air force 150 sidewinder air-to-air missiles for use in their own L-159 fighter planes.

In addition to the Czech police forces on the ground, 2,000 FBI agents and 250 specially trained US soldiers will also be deployed in the city during the summit.

Meanwhile, an enormous surveillance and control operation has been established to restrict entry into the Czech Republic during the week of the conference. Various embassies are warning of the significant delays and obstacles confronting those seeking to travel to or

in the Czech Republic.

Following newspaper announcements that anti-NATO demonstrators were planning to establish a base camp for their activities in the German city of Dresden (two hours from Prague), a speaker for the state government of Saxony warned demonstrators to reconsider any plans to travel to the Czech capital. The Interior Ministry of Saxony is collaborating with police to collect information on potentially “disruptive” elements and would consider banning such persons from crossing the German-Czech border.

Ordinary Prague citizens and small businesses have expressed dissatisfaction with the enormous police and military presence in their city on the eve of the NATO meeting. Prague is still recovering from the affects of disastrous floods that hit the city recently and badly affected the tourist industry. Now incomes and commercial sales will be further cut by the disruptions arising from the NATO summit.

Anti-NATO protesters held a demonstration yesterday to mark the opening of the summit, and have planned an international day of action against the summit for November 21.



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