

# Antiwar protesters arrested at Scottish airport

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Prestwick airport, near Glasgow, Scotland, has become a focus for antiwar protests following reports that it is being used for refuelling by US military transport flights carrying “bunker buster” bombs en route to Israel.

Just days after Israel began its offensive in Lebanon, the US approved a request from the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for accelerated deliveries of the bombs. The munitions, which can penetrate more than seven feet of reinforced concrete, have been used to devastating effect against the civilian population of Lebanon, including in the Qana massacre.

On August 6, seven protestors were arrested within the perimeter of Prestwick airport—four on the runway and three inside a United States Air Force transport plane. Activists with the pacifist group Trident Ploughshares said they boarded the aircraft as part of an investigation into the extent of British government assistance with the transport of arms to Israel.

A press release for the group said, “We acted as War Crime Detectives. Britain is breaching international law by allowing Prestwick to be used by the US to fly bombs to Israel... It is vital that international law is upheld and equally vital that ordinary citizens take the initiative in exposing state crime.”

On this occasion, the flight was a personnel transport plane. One man was arrested in the aircraft’s cockpit. The group noted that up to eight US Air Force aircraft appeared to be at Prestwick at the time.

Four more people were arrested on Monday as they tried to board a Polar Air Boeing 747, having already searched a US Air National Guard Hercules and examined onboard documentation.

A total of 17 people have been charged with a number of offences, including breaching the Aviation Security Act. Two of the protesters were remanded in

custody. The remainder are to appear in court later.

Details of the US military flights first emerged on July 26, when it was reported that two chartered A310 Airbus cargo planes had passed through Prestwick, carrying 5,000 pound laser guided GBU28 “bunker buster” bombs intended for use in the ongoing US-Israeli destruction of Lebanon.

Prestwick’s military use was already sensitive following exposure of British collaboration with US “rendition” flights—whereby alleged terrorists are turned over to foreign governments that are notorious for torturing prisoners. Between June, 2004 and September, 2005, as many as 75 rendition flights used Prestwick, out of at least 210 over the UK as a whole. Glasgow and Edinburgh airports were also used.

News of the “bunker busters” flights generated immediate protests. On July 30, 200 people gathered within Prestwick airport terminal, including members of Glasgow’s Lebanese community, to protest both the military traffic and the war.

Air traffic controllers at Prestwick have also raised concerns. One told the BBC, “We work with military aircraft all the time and people here are professional... They would never leave traffic that needs to be dealt with, but there are people who feel uncomfortable working with certain aircraft.”

The transport flights also briefly became a focal point for complaints from sections of the opposition parties and the civil service.

Ever since the “Yo, Blair!” conversation between President George Bush and the British prime minister was picked up on a microphone, there have been complaints that the UK has not received the special favours Blair had promised as a result of his unstinting support for the US-led invasion of Iraq.

In an attempt to reassert some semblance of an

independent foreign policy, some political commentators had called on the government to insist that the US abide by formal procedures and request permission to refuel in the UK.

Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell said that if reports that the US had not made such a request were true, it would be “particularly provocative” behaviour that “can only reinforce the belief of many that Britain is taken for granted in the so-called special relationship.”

Alex Salmond of the Scottish National Party said that the government must decide whether to be an “aircraft carrier” for the US.

In an attempt to counter such criticisms, Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett made a show of protest and promised that “we will be making a formal protest if it appears that that is what has happened.”

Even this was too much for Blair, who flatly denied that there was any problem with the military flights. The issue at Prestwick, he said, was that the government “should just apply the rules in the appropriate way, which is what we are doing.” The matter was soon resolved after it was reported that Bush had told Blair he was sorry for any “problem” over the flights.

The US bunker buster flights were re-routed to Prestwick because the Irish government had ruled out the use of Shannon airport for the stopovers, due to a series of antiwar protests at the airport since the invasion of Iraq. Faced with the protests in Scotland, the Blair government has now announced that such sensitive flights will be moved to British military bases where security is stronger and there is no public terminal.



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