

Asia-Europe summit in Hamburg

Germany: Huge police deployment in run-up to G8 summit

Our reporter
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German politicians and security forces used the Asia-Europe summit (ASEM) held in the northern German city of Hamburg last weekend for a massive police mobilisation against demonstrators. The summit, which brought together 27 European and 16 Asian foreign ministers for discussion over environmental policies, was deliberately used by the German authorities as a “dress rehearsal” for the G8 summit due to take place next week at the Baltic Sea resort of Heiligendamm.

The provocative action of the Hamburg police led to indignant reactions by both globalisation protesters and sections of the Hamburg population. The massive police deployment made a mockery of the democratic right to assembly. Following a series of nationwide raids by police on March 9, it was clear that this latest heavy-handed police action was aimed exclusively at intimidating and criminalising critics and opponents of the G8 summit. Central Hamburg had been the scene of a large-scale police raid on March 9.

The press at the weekend sought to spread panic with reports of between 1,000 and 2,000 “violent rioters” poised to commit violent acts. Prior to the action, Hamburg Interior Senator Udo Nagel (independent) had warned the authorities would adopt a “zero tolerance” approach to what was in fact a quite legal protest.

On Sunday and Monday, large parts of the city centre were hermetically sealed off and made inaccessible to tourists and shoppers. Squads of heavily armed police with water cannon and armoured cars supervised the barriers at the town hall square and other central places. Bus and metro traffic was rerouted or blocked off. Buses were not allowed to stop at city centre stops, and passengers were not allowed to exit there.

For a period of three days, columns of police cars

flashing blue lights and sounding their sirens raced through the city. The demonstration—held under the slogan “Gate to global resistance—against the G8 and European Union summit”—was only permitted to assemble at a great distance from the summit itself, and protesters were only allowed to march along completely empty streets. The estimated 6,000 peaceful demonstrators were escorted and virtually encircled by several thousand heavily armed police marching in rows alongside the protesters.

The organisers eventually dissolved the demonstration prematurely at a spot that was closest to the summit meeting place, as the protesters were not prepared to march through a completely empty city centre while surrounded by police. The organisers had already been forbidden from holding a rally in front of the city hall by a high court decree. The Hamburg chief of police had justified this restriction of the right to assembly and free speech with the argument that any rally in front of the city hall endangered the summit.

After the dissolution of the demonstration, participants sought to disperse but, according to organisers, were then restrained by the Hamburg police who formed a chain encircling the protesters. Coming after previous police provocations and intimidation in the city, tempers rose amongst some young demonstrators.

Confrontations took place between police and protesters in which bottles and bags of paint were tossed. Some demonstrators then set up barricades in front of the old theatre building Rota Flora, which had been raided by police on March 9. Violent scuffles took place resulting in injuries to a number of protesters. Several hundred anarchists then used tables and

benches to set up barricades, which they set on fire.

The police then advanced on the protesters with water cannon and batons. According to police reports, 120 demonstrators were arrested and 179 police officials were injured. No figures were released on the number of injured demonstrators. A total of 150 policemen were alleged to have suffered eye irritation following the supposed use of tear gas by protesters. One policeman drew his pistol, but explained he was merely acting in “self-defence.”

In fact, it is a wonder that there were not more casualties, bearing in mind the overheated atmosphere following the police provocation. Following the well-publicised brutality by Italian security forces at the G8 protest held in Geneva in June 2001, one demonstrator—Carlo Giuliani—died at the hands of the police.

The speaker for the Hamburg police spoke of an extremely successful deployment, and the city’s mayor, Ole von Beust, also praised the police. Interior Senator Nagel declared: “The tactics of the police were correct. It was possible to successfully protect the ASEM guests and citizens of Hamburg against acts of violence.”

The police trade union (Union of Police) also expressed its satisfaction with the brutal police operation. “With very many police, and an extensive deployment, we were able to ensure security—at least with regard to the taking place of the demonstration,” was the comment by Police Union Chief Konrad Freiburg. “One can say that the police deployment was successful,” he said.

German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier, who hosted the ASEM conference, also expressed his agreement with the suppression of the democratic right to free speech, while at the same time playing down the imperialist nature of the EU-Asia conference and the upcoming G8 summit. “Why should one demonstrate against a conference at which Europeans and Asians attempt to draw attention to different centres of conflict in the world?” he asked.

Steinmeier added that it was “an obligation in a situation where there are so many conflicts in the world to seek out partners for a solution to such conflicts.” It was a “great success” that so many had sat down together in Hamburg and exchanged their opinions on “centres of conflict,” such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, he said. “That has its own value, and we

should defend it also against those who criticise, even though they may not be fully aware of what we are doing here,” Steinmeier explained.

Predictably, Steinmeier made absolutely no mention of the economic policies and aggressive military policies of the leading G8 countries, which are instrumental in bringing about such “centres of conflict.”



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