

Britain: High Court hears evidence on police violence against G20 protest

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Documents disclosed to the High Court in London last week reveal more of the brutality meted out against peaceful protesters at the G20 international summit demonstrations earlier this year in London.

Tactics used by police during the G20 were first laid bare by the death of Ian Tomlinson on April 1. A newspaper vendor, he was attempting to return home from work when he became trapped in a “kettling” operation, involving the forcible detention of protestors behind police lines.

It was initially claimed that Tomlinson died from natural causes, but video footage leaked to the media showed that he had been subject to two separate unprovoked assaults from behind by a balaclava-wearing police officer and a member of the Metropolitan Police’s Territorial Support Group. He died two minutes after the last assault.

Evidence presented so far during the High Court action confirms that Tomlinson’s death was the result of a broader pattern of violence employed by police during the protests. The action has been brought by three “Climate Camp” protesters, Christopher Abbott, Joshua Moos and Hannah McClure. All three allege that they were attacked, and that they witnessed others being assaulted by Metropolitan Police officers.

Abbot had sat down on the street participating at the Climate Camp protest in the Bishopsgate area when he was brutally attacked by a police officer. In May, he told a parliamentary select committee hearing on the policing of the G20 protests, “If I am sitting on the floor talking to my girlfriend in a peaceful protest and had been knocked back onto my back with my arms clearly in the air—under what circumstances is it justified to punch me in the face?”

Abbott added, “Having dragged me up and pushed me back onto the camp—what circumstances are there for

smashing me in the side of the head with a shield as a weapon?”

At the High Court Abbott elaborated further on the assault, including injuries sustained by his girlfriend during the protest. She had been hurled back into the crowd of demonstrators that were being contained behind a police cordon.

Despite his girlfriend “requiring urgent medication,” he told the court, police officers refused to let her leave. It was only after several hours, at approximately 11:15 pm, that she was allowed to leave the cordon, Abbott alleged. By this time she had “collapsed,” he said.

Moos, aged 21, told the court that he was struck by police despite the fact that he had his hands behind his back in an attempt to show he was protesting peacefully. McClure, also 21, says that she was struck by riot officers’ shields.

An article published in the *Observer* cited evidence taken from police notebooks, written down the day after the April 1 demonstration. These have been released to the court as the result of a legal case against the Metropolitan Police initiated by the solicitors for the claimant, Bindmans.

A statement from Bindmans says that the legal action aims to challenge “the use of ‘kettling,’ the controversial police tactic of forcibly containing a potentially disruptive crowd, as unlawful and unjustified, and also calls into the legitimacy of widespread use of force against a peaceful protest.”

In one notebook cited by the *Guardian*, a police constable described how when he saw a protester pushing against officers’ shields, “I punched him in the jaw and he moved backwards.”

Another police officer recounted how he struck protesters with “shield strikes both flat and angled. I also delivered open palm strikes to a number of individuals and fist strikes as well.”

In another notebook a third police officer recorded, “To get the protesters who would not move, I needed to hit the flat part of my shield to get them to move back. I also used open-handed palm strikes. Once the protesters were moved back to the required distance, we remained in a closed cordon until relieved.”

The *Guardian* report also reveals the contents of other Metropolitan Police logbooks. Chief Superintendent Michael Johnson was in charge of the policing of the Climate Camp. His logbook contradicts initial police claims that it was necessary for them to forcibly enter and surround the Climate Camp due to the danger of violence. Instead, the police evidence records it as a peaceful event.

The *Guardian* notes that “police logs state that, at 6.12 pm, Bronze command received information, possibly from an undercover informant in the Climate Camp, that there was a ‘party atmosphere. No issues.’”

Less than one hour later, police began their push against the camp, at 7.04 pm.

A further account in a police officer’s notebook states, “We were directed to push back the Climate Change protesters approximately 20-30 metres beyond two alleyways.... I used my round shield to push back the crowd, which was 15 people deep.”

These police logs relating to the break-up of the Climate Camp do not comment on or note the level of force that was to be used by the riot police.

One of those representing the three claimants is the human rights specialist lawyer John Halford. In a news item on the firm’s Web site, Halford questions why no such instruction is available in the logbooks.

“What is most striking about this case is not what has been disclosed by the police, but what apparently does not exist. There is nothing to show proper consideration was given by senior officers to the legal tests that must be met before a kettle can be imposed.

“There is nothing to show a proper release plan was formulated, much less disseminated to the officers who formed the cordons around the protest. Most chilling of all is the absence of a single recorded instruction to those officers about when they could use force and what would be reasonable, given this was a peaceful demonstration that the police themselves assessed as having a ‘party atmosphere’ just moments before the decision to kettle was made.

“Absent such instructions, many officers apparently behaved as if they had been unleashed on a rioting mob, rather than the peaceful assembly taking place. If they were instructed to use violence in the way they did, that

was unlawful. But the failure to prevent this from happening was an equally serious dereliction of their senior officers’ duties.”

The three cases before the High Court are just the tip of the iceberg.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) has received a total of 277 complaints from people present during the events. These are backed up by the hundreds of videos and images of instances of police violence that were also taken, mainly on mobile phones, by protesters at the demonstrations, as well as those recorded by passers-by and the official media outlets. A search for “G20 police violence” on YouTube this week lists 348 videos while “G20 police brutality” finds 259 videos.

According to the *Guardian*, many of the complaints are “alleging police aggression and injuries, mostly arising out of the police ‘kettling’ operation, where demonstrators and passers-by were penned in, sometimes assaulted and left without food or water until the early hours of the morning. One woman on whom the IPCC reported believes she may have suffered a miscarriage.”

The 23-year-old woman cited was kicked and shoved with riot shields during the Climate Camp police operation and alleges that she was left with heavy vaginal bleeding. Despite needing urgent medical attention the woman was held in the “kettle” for up to five hours.

Even the tame IPCC has felt obliged to make a statement critical of the police operation.

IPCC commissioner for London Deborah Glass said that the young woman’s “experience appears to have been typical of many peaceful protestors on April 1.

“She was caught up in what appears to have been a frightening experience over which she had little or no control.

“Like many others that day, she says she had no prior warning of the police intention to use force in containing the crowd, and no prior warning of a containment tactic that prevented her leaving.”



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