

Police arrest 15 Muslims in clash in New York suburb

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An angry clash broke out on August 30 when female Muslim visitors to an amusement park in suburban New York City were told they were barred from certain rides because they were wearing the traditional hijab, or headscarf. About 100 police and 60 squad cars from neighboring towns converged on the park, and 15 visitors, both men and women, were arrested. Two were charged with felony assault.

The occasion was a holiday marking the end of Ramadan. A group of approximately 3,000 New York City area Muslims, including many families and youth, were taking part in an outing to Rye Playland, owned and operated by Westchester County just north of New York City.

The sponsoring organization was the Muslim American Society of New York. Park officials claimed they had notified the trip organizer of their policy of banning headscarves on certain rides, for safety reasons. Visitors, however, said that they had not been informed and that they had been treated rudely by park personnel and then brutally by the police.

As confused and angry visitors assembled to demand refunds, an argument broke out. The violence soon escalated as swarms of police arrived on the site, closing highway ramps and locking down the park.

The young people were especially angry at the way they were treated. Dena Meawad, 18, from Brooklyn, told the New York *Daily News* that a woman had been arguing with the police over the park's rule on headscarves. "The cops started getting loud with her and she started getting loud, too," she said. "They pushed her on the ground and arrested her ... She just wanted to get on a ride. That was it. It's clear this all happened because we're Muslim."

Ayman Alrabah, 24, in an interview with the *News*, explained the scene. "We requested a refund and all of

a sudden an argument became a riot," she said. "Cops came. They were hitting my brother, my dad. My husband was on the floor and they were handcuffing him." Ayman added, "They treated us like animals, like we were nothing. They came with their dogs and sticks. We came to have fun."

Recounting the police violence, a young park-goer with a bruised and bloodied face told a local Fox TV news affiliate of the events preceding his arrest. "The officer took his fist and started punching me in the face. The whole time they were punching me, I was telling them to arrest me," he said. "I was not resisting arrest at all."

Another witness accused the police of aggression. "They came ready to attack," she said. "They took my brother, they threw him on the floor. They took my husband in front of my child and they cuffed him."

A spokesman of the New York chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Muslim-American advocacy group, said that the authorities had overreacted. "There seems to have been a disproportionate response in which police used excessive strength and force to subdue female protesters," he told the *New York Times*. "That had a snowball effect on the antagonism and aggression that ensued."

While a Westchester County parks official said, "This is all about safety, not about religion," a spokeswoman for the Six Flags Great Adventure Park in nearby New Jersey said there was no ban on the wearing of headscarves there, because they are typically wrapped securely around the head.

The police response at the Rye amusement park takes place in the context of ongoing scapegoating of Muslims as well as the whipping up of hostility to immigrants in general. It also reflects the growing fears

among US authorities that, under conditions of aggravated social tensions, any incident can give rise to serious social unrest.

The language used by local officials was quite explicit along these lines, justifying the attack and arrests on the grounds that “the police had no choice to interfere, or it could have turned into a riot.”

The reaction of the workers and youth, both on August 30 and in statements given to the media afterwards, indicates the growing anger in the face of both of anti-immigrant bigotry as well as the deepening social crisis.



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