

# Mass arrests continue in London and other cities in global Extinction Rebellion protests

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Police have arrested over 1,300 Extinction Rebellion (XR) climate protestors in London after the first seven days of a planned 14 days of protests. London is the focal point of a globally coordinated series of protests in 23 cities around the world.

XR is seeking to raise public awareness of global warming and climate change, while demanding policy changes from the world's governments.

During the first days of protests, nearly 400 people were arrested across three continents in Amsterdam, Vienna, Madrid, Melbourne, Sydney, Wellington, New York, Olympia, Toronto, and Halifax.

On Saturday, police stepped up repression, arresting up to 300 Extinction Rebellion protesters in the Belgian capital, Brussels, after first brutally attacking them with water cannon and pepper spray. Reuters reported, "The climate change activists had gathered in front of the Royal Palace in the city center, disrupting traffic. Police declined to give a precise number of arrests but a Reuters cameraman saw between 250-300 protesters being led away."

Specialist "protest removal teams" of police have been mobilised from across the UK, including 100 from Scotland, to bolster the thousands already ranged against protesters in the capital. The Met has increased shift teams and cancelled other police work to confront the protesters. There are reports of police officers sleeping in cars and vans in order to maintain numbers to deal with the protesters.

By Sunday afternoon, police had arrested 1,309 protesters in London, an average of 187 per day. This is already more than the 1,130 detained in the first wave of XR demonstrations in April.

Such has been the frenzy to make arrests that even the 63-year-old Princess Marie-Esmeralda of Belgium was swept up in the dragnet and detained for five hours at Camden police station. The *Guardian* reported, "She is thought to live in London and works as a journalist, author and documentary maker."

The princess is the daughter of King Leopold III and the Princess of Rethy and was born at the Chateau du

Stuyvenberg in Brussels. She showed the media her police release letter listing her name as Esmarelda De Belgique, which warned the police may need to speak to her again as "the matter is not concluded."

Last Wednesday, Metropolitan Commissioner Cressida Dick warned in a video, "[W]e have arrested more than 600 protesters in the last two days," and said, "If you act unlawfully we will arrest you and we will seize things that you are using to obstruct the highways in London."

The Metropolitan Police are not allowing XR protesters to gather at 12 selected sites across the capital but only in Trafalgar Square. Dick threatened, "If you want to protest, you can go to the middle of Trafalgar Square. If you are protesting in the other sites, you are acting unlawfully. We will arrest you. I imagine you will go to court and you are very likely to get a criminal record."

Dick is a long-served representative of the British state and is notorious for having commanded the operation that resulted in the murder of an innocent Brazilian worker, Jean Charles de Menezes, in the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings. Within four years of this atrocity, Dick was promoted to Met assistant commissioner and became Commissioner in 2017.

Dick's video was followed up Thursday by one from a custody inspector at Brixton police station in south London in which he emphasised that coming mass arrests would not be a problem for the Met. He said, "We haven't run out of cell capacity. We've had a lot of detainees in and it has been busy." Smirking to the camera the inspector said, "But we've got plenty of cells here at Brixton and loads more across the whole of the Met estate. Don't worry, there's plenty of room for everyone."

On Friday, ahead of this week's XR protests in London, the Met boasted it was "a large organisation with thorough contingency plans regarding cell capacity."

There is a growing body of evidence showing that the police are taking a harder line than they did in the April protests. The Met refer to the XR protests on their website as the "Autumn Uprising." In the interim since April the right-

wing Policy Exchange think tank issued a report, “Extremism Rebellion,” calling for a clampdown on protesters. It made a recommendation, backed by politicians and the right-wing media, that they be prosecuted using the full force of the law. One of the report’s authors, Richard Walton, is a former head of the Met’s Counter Terrorism Command.

From the start of the latest protests, police used scissors to cut people out of tents along Whitehall—the location of the prime minister’s residence at Downing Street and other government buildings. Police shifted people to Trafalgar Square, with those refusing to move arrested and carted off to police cells. More than 80 tonnes of equipment used by demonstrators in central London was seized by the Met this week, including tents, portable toilets and generators.

One protester, Larch Maxey, complained that police broke his finger “like a carrot.” Maxey said he was carrying scaffolding into Trafalgar Square when “police just pounced on me and one of them just decided to grasp my index finger really forcefully and snap it.”

On Friday, legal environment charity Plan B wrote to the Met commissioner about “numerous instances of human rights violations” by the police. These included:

- Armed police, carrying rifles, stopping members of Extinction Rebellion and ordering them to put their hands in the air
- Breaking the finger of a peaceful protestor
- A plain clothes police officer attempting to incite violence in the crowd
- Arbitrary and aggressive use of stop and search powers
- Treading on protesters and dragging protesters
- Forcefully removing tents without checking whether children or others were inside
- Seizing portaloos, nappies, food, cooking equipment and disability ramps under the pretext that such items were needed in “evidence”
- Cyber attacks on social media assets
- Failing to investigate evidence in favour of the protesters
- Ignoring CPS [Crown Prosecution Service] guidance on policing peaceful protest.

The mass arrests and increasingly aggressive action against peaceful protesters are a naked display of state repression designed to intimidate and silence political and social opposition among much broader layers.

Further draconian clampdowns on XR protesters and legislation aimed at criminalising the right to protest are being pushed through by governments of all stripes hit by the protests of climate change protesters in the last year.

The *Daily Telegraph* reported Saturday that Boris Johnson’s Conservative government is planning legislation that would “make it easier for police to restrict protests if

they threaten ‘serious disruption’ and to curb repeat offenders by imposing banning orders. It would also increase penalties for public order offences such as obstruction of a highway.” The Tory-supporting *Telegraph* noted, “It is thought ministers are eyeing the reforms for the Conservative manifesto” in any imminent general election.

The rewrite of the criteria for what is deemed “serious disruption” in order to restrict or ban protests is backed by the police, reported the newspaper. It cited a “senior source” who said, “The main change needed is this ridiculous definition of serious disruption. If you cannot evidentially demonstrate a threat of serious disruption, you cannot place restrictions on static protests.”

Mike Penning, the Minister of State for the Armed Forces and a former policing and justice minister in the 2010-2015 Cameron Tory government, said, “There has to be a sanction between a caution and court action that says if you persist then that is a breach and you could have a custodial sentence... There has to be a deterrent rather than repeated arrests being seen as a badge of honour.”

In Australia, the governing Liberal Party Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and Employment Minister Michaelia Cash are examining ways to cut off welfare payments to protesters. In the state of Queensland, Labor Party premier Annastacia Palaszczuk is pushing legislation to allow severe penalties for protesters, including sentences of up to two years in prison or fines of up to \$6,500 for anyone using a locking device to fix themselves to roads, rail lines and machinery, etc.

While these are ostensibly aimed at the growing number of climate change and environmental protests, all such authoritarian measures are ultimately targeted against a resurgence in struggles, including against government repression, by the working class internationally.



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