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Miami probes police crushing of trade protests

By Michael Christie

MIAMI, Jan 16 (Reuters) - A civilian panel, facing mistrust among activists, promised an unbiased investigation as it opened a probe of police brutality and infringements of civil rights during protests last year outside a regional free trade meeting in Miami.

The Civilian Investigative Panel of the City of Miami held its first hearing on Thursday night, and heard from activists who said police arrested without cause, fired rubber bullets indiscriminately and kept people in handcuffs for 12 hours during the Nov. 17-21 Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting.

But many activists said they would not cooperate because of mistrust, and demanded a panel member resign because he had praised Police Chief John Timoney for saving Miami from the riots that marred the 1999 Seattle world trade talks.

"The AFL-CIO, the entire labor movement and I am personally committed to making sure this brutality never happens again," said Fred Frost, head of the South Florida AFL-CIO, a trade union federation with 13 million members nationwide.

"I hope this panel restores my faith and my civil rights."

More than 200 people were arrested during the FTAA meeting, at which trade ministers from the Americas failed to make much progress in creating what would be the world's biggest trade zone.

The bulk of the arrests came on Nov. 20, when a mass rally organized by trade unions, environmentalists, civil rights activists and others turned into street skirmishes.

Ranks of riot police fired volleys of rubber bullets, tear gas and pepper spray to drive away largely peaceful marchers.

Police say they reacted, with restraint, when "anarchists" began to throw stones and other missiles.

Protester Nikki Hartman told the investigative panel she was shot several times, and wounded in the head.

"I can't tell you who shot me. I can't tell you because they weren't identified. And I can't tell you because my back was turned," Hartman said.

Others told of elderly Holocaust survivors thrown to the ground and kned in the back before being handcuffed. They had been trying to find their way back to buses that police had initially agreed to allow into town but then barred.

The AFL-CIO and the American Civil Liberties Union told the panel they would be filing lawsuits against Miami.

The panel's next session is scheduled for Feb. 5, when it will hear from police.