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Find truth about police, panel told  
Police review panels hear allegations of police misconduct during  
hemispheric trade summit protests two months ago.  
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In an emotional four-hour hearing Thursday, civil libertarians had a clear message for members of Miami's Civilian Investigative Panel: We are counting on you to use your subpoena power to uncover the truth behind police conduct at November's controversial trade summit protests.

More than 100 people crowded into the City Commission chamber to hear or deliver testimony about allegations of civil rights violations by police during the Free Trade Area of the Americas ministerial meeting. Police officials, who will speak at a Feb. 5 hearing, say their officers acted properly.

Allegations made by dozens of protesters during the past two months were recounted, person by person, before two boards that will likely spend the next few months poring over records and assessing the facts.

Miami's CIP held the meeting jointly with Miami-Dade County's Independent Review Board -- a panel that also reviews complaints against police but does not have the CIP's subpoena power.

Most who spoke did not testify about individual complaints, but made general comments about how police handled the protests.

"I hope this investigation restores my faith and my civil rights," said Fred Frost, president of the South Florida AFL-CIO. "If you allow police officers to get away with what they did on Nov. 20, then this country is in sorry shape."

One protester, on the brink of tears, held up an enlarged photo of herself at the FTAA demonstrations with her neck and shirt soaked in blood from a rubber bullet allegedly fired at her head.

Others said some protesters were unfairly arrested, thrown to the ground, denied water for medication, and indiscriminately shot by officers armed with nonlethal weapons.

"I can't tell you who shot me," said Nikki Hartman, who said she was hit three times by concussion grenades, once in the head. "I can't tell you because they weren't identified. And I can't tell you because my back was turned whenever I was shot."

Nearly everyone who spoke said law enforcement officials violated constitutional rights by barring people from protest sites, not wearing identifiable uniforms, not giving protesters adequate warnings to disperse and firing indiscriminately at people who were simply exercising their free speech rights.

"The Miami Police Department did not reflect a model for the country to

follow," said Tony Francsetta, a union activist. "I know you have a right to do something about this. Don't be afraid to stand up to the people who put you where you are at."

Several protesters said they were leery about the panels because they had no enforcement power and because one of the CIP members, Peter Roulhac, praised Miami Police Chief John Timoney at a public event. They said a resignation by Roulhac would restore credibility to the board.

Roulhac, chairman of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, did not speak at the hearing but said afterward he had a lot of "soul searching to do tonight."

"You are not going to find a more objective person," he said, speaking about himself. "But I heard the community -- big time."

Protesters also called on the Miami panel to use its subpoena power to find out if the police have been withholding information.

But CIP Chairman Larry Handfield cautioned that they would use their power with discretion.

"Our task is historical, difficult and challenging," Handfield said. "When you have the power to issue a subpoena, it is a power we cannot abuse. Nor should we be reluctant to use it when we have the proper cause to use it. Please understand our job is to be fair, thorough and unbiased."

Herald columnist Jim DeFede contributed to this report.