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## **Panel to open FTAA police probe**

**A new Miami civilian panel is in the spotlight as it faces the grueling task of determining whether police mishandled protests at the trade summit.**

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Miami's Civilian Investigative Panel today begins taking on its most high-profile, and high-stakes, challenge to date -- determining whether the city police department mishandled protesters or violated civil liberties during November's trade summit.

Controversy over police conduct at the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit has forced the CIP, which became a full-fledged panel a few months ago, to forgo baby steps and immediately try to resolve an issue that sparked a national outcry from civil rights groups.

The CIP and Miami-Dade's Independent Review Panel, created in 1980 following a series of race riots, will hold a joint public meeting today to hear testimony from the public about the police response. Both city and county police are also conducting their own reviews.

Even those responsible for the CIP's creation less than a year ago say the panel's first task is more arduous than they envisioned. And it could come with lasting consequences.

"This is what we wanted the CIP for, this is what the community envisioned -- to the extreme," said Max Rameau, an activist who has pushed for independent oversight boards at the city and county levels. "But if the CIP does not step up and conduct a full, thorough and critical investigation, then they would have wasted our time in developing the CIP. This is a very important test for them. It's huge."

The public hearings will be the first of many steps to answer the lingering questions from November: Did police overreact to the protests? Were innocent bystanders unfairly arrested? Did police violate civil laws by denying access to rallies and marches?

Depending on how many people turn up at the hearing, the CIP and IRP may decide to investigate individual complaints, or could seek overall policy changes for the city and county police agencies.

Neither panel has enforcement power, but can make recommendations.

However, Miami's CIP members have additional leverage because they are among a small number of civilian panels in the country with subpoena power.

Even after months of work, the panels will likely have a difficult time pleasing both protesters and the police department, if the experience of other cities is any indication.

In Seattle, where three temporary civilian panels were formed to look into policy issues, such as crowd control and police preparedness, following clashes at the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999, civil libertarians are still seething over the outcome.

Doug Honig, spokesman for the Washington State American Civil Liberties Union, said the panels failed to hold individual police officers and supervisors accountable, did not require civil liberties training for officers, and did not suspend the use of tear gas -- all requests made by the ACLU.

"Issuing a report is a first step, and an important first step. But if there is no change of policy then there is no real change," Honig said.

While both panels in Miami-Dade are urging people to file complaints with them, civil rights activists say they remain leery of the panels' ability -- and willingness -- to make changes.

"They can make recommendations, but they can't enforce them," said Kris Hermes, spokesman for the Miami Activist Defense, which is representing several protesters. ``So at the end of the day, I don't know, really, how much change will be able to occur."

Some anti-FTAA groups are making recommendations of their own, saying the CIP should use its subpoena power, and urging anyone with complaints to come forward -- with caution.

"Even though we don't have a lot of faith in the panel, we do want to show the seriousness of what's happening," said Naomi Arche, a spokeswoman for the Save Our Civil Liberties Campaign.