

Protesters contend Miami police abused them, stepped on their civil rights  
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Miami Bureau

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MIAMI -- A longtime Miami lawyer says police shot her in the back with rubber bullets as she walked away from officers in riot gear.

A 63-year-old man says police arrested him as he was trying to leave a demonstration.

A reporter says she was ordered to the ground, handcuffed and arrested for walking down the street.

While activists continue to document what they say was a disturbing pattern of police abuse during last week's anti-globalization demonstrations, more stories are emerging from protesters and others who say their civil rights were violated.

Activists say police stopped, detained and threatened hundreds of protesters; placed dozens of people and a few of their gathering spots under surveillance; and arrested many more demonstrators who were simply exercising their right to free speech. They say police used the need to deal with a small group of disruptive protesters to stifle dissent by thousands of others who came to Miami to speak out against the Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting.

The allegations in Miami come when some members of Congress are calling for hearings into an FBI bulletin sent to more than 17,000 state and local police agencies last month, urging authorities to report suspicious behavior at anti-war protests to the FBI.

The American Civil Liberties Union and other groups say the bulletin raises concerns that the FBI might return to the abuses of the 1960s and 1970s, when its agents gathered intelligence intended to neutralize anti-Vietnam War protesters, civil rights demonstrators and other dissenters.

"Our country is founded on the very fabric of dissent, and it must be decriminalized," said Naomi Archer, of South Floridians for Fair Trade and Global Justice.

Miami police officials could not be reached for comment, but they have repeatedly defended their actions, saying officers showed a tremendous amount of restraint during the anti-globalization protests. Miami-Dade police officials also praised their officers.

To dispute the police claims, activists played a video at a recent news conference that showed police clashing with demonstrators, firing pepper spray and rubber bullets -- indiscriminately, activists say -- at the crowds last week.

The video also captured footage of Miami lawyer Elizabeth Ritter, who stood peacefully in front of a row of officers in black riot gear with a sign meant to protest what she saw as the creation of a police state in her hometown, not the trade talks. The sign read: "Fear Totalitarianism."

A short time later, Ritter was hit by at least five rubber bullets as she walked away from officers. One hit her in the back of the head while she crouched behind her sign.

"Never in a million years did it occur to me that my police department would hurt me or much less shoot me in the back," Ritter said.

Allan Taylor, a retired pharmacist and lawyer from Delray Beach, said officers corralled him and a group of others conducting a vigil for jailed demonstrators, preventing them from complying with an earlier police order that they leave the area. Taylor, 63, was charged with unlawful assembly and resisting arrest without violence.

Celeste Fraser Delgado, a reporter with the Miami New Times, also was arrested last week. She was charged with failure to obey a lawful command and resisting arrest without violence, despite her assertions that she followed the arresting officers' orders. The charges were later dropped.

Amnesty International, union leaders and other activists are asking for an independent investigation into the mounting allegations of police abuse.

They include Brenna Bell, an Oregon-based attorney with the National Lawyers Guild, who claims she was arrested while trying to obey police orders to disperse from a peaceful demonstration.

"If this is homeland security," she said, "I'm not feeling very secure."

Information from The Associated Press was used to supplement this report.

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