

US - Hundreds Arrested in Week of Anti-War Actions (by Haider Rizvi)

Thursday 28 September 2006, posted by [Mika](#)

[IPS](#) - Demonstrations, marches, rallies, vigils and prayer meetings continue to take place in dozens of cities across the United States this week as part of a nationwide campaign aiming to force the administration of President George W. Bush and Congress to end the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

Since last Thursday, when more than 500 anti-war groups and religious organisations signed on to the "Declaration of Peace", some 250 activists have been arrested in various cities for taking part in nonviolent actions.

In addition to demanding a "prompt timetable" for the withdrawal of the 130,000 U.S. troops currently stationed in Iraq, the declaration calls for the closure of bases, a peace process for security, reconstruction, and reconciliation; and a shift of funding from the military to meeting human needs.

Organisers conducted more than 375 actions of civil disobedience and protest in all parts of the country, including Lincoln, Nebraska; Houston, Texas; Des Moines, Idaho; Little Rock, Arkansas; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Fayetteville, North Carolina — which is home to Fort Bragg, the largest U.S. army installation in the world.

Though the campaign is heavily dominated by faith-based groups, many lawmakers, former military veterans, women's groups and immigrant organisations are also actively participating in the ongoing protests, which were scheduled to wind down Thursday.

The first arrests took place in Washington last week when activists tried to deliver copies of the declaration to officials in the George W. Bush administration as part of their pledge to get involved in actions of civil disobedience.

Other actions that involved arrests were organised at the Senate and House of Representatives, as well as at Congressional offices, military bases and military recruitment centres.

Aware that many politicians are reluctant to join the campaign because they do not want to be branded as unpatriotic, religious leaders are hoping that their call for peace might give the government moral courage to set a firm deadline to end the occupation of Iraq.

"As citizens and people of faith, we must be our country's conscience," said Rev. Lennox Yearwood of the Hip Hop Caucus, one of 34 activists arrested for taking part in the White House action.

Meanwhile, over 100 Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders have planned other actions to prevent a possible attack on Iran. They said they will be calling on the U.S. Congress this week to assert its "oversight function" to prevent such an eventuality.

As part of the campaign, many activists are staging sit-ins outside the residences of their elected representatives who have not voiced opposition to the Bush policy on the war in Iraq.

"We are spending billions of dollars a week on the occupation of Iraq. This money can be spent on health and education," said Molly Nolan, a 62-year-old activist who joined others in a protest outside the home of New York Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer.

"New Yorkers need schools and jobs, not this endless war," the crowd shouted in front of Schumer's

house.

"Along with other politicians, you did not speak out," said Carolyn Eisenberg, cofounder of a group called Brooklyn Parents for Peace, while directly addressing the senator. "We call upon you to show courage, to stand for principle."

Like Schumer, many Democratic lawmakers have kept their distance from the anti-war movement, but some have publicly denounced the Bush policy on Iraq.

"As a participant in the Civil Rights Movement, I have confronted violence with nonviolence. I have been beaten and left bloody in the streets to die," said Rep. John Lewis of the southern U.S. state of Georgia after signing the declaration last week.

"And what I came to realise is that our strongest weapons as a nation are not bombs and missiles," he added. "Our strongest defence is the power of our ideas. It is what we believe about democracy and respect for human dignity."

Other lawmakers who have signed the Declaration for Peace include Rep. Earl Blumenauer of Oregon, Danny Davis and Jan Schakowsky of Illinois, Chaka Fattah of Pennsylvania, and Sam Farr, Barbara Lee and Lynn Woolsey of California.

Despite protests and growing criticism of the war from various quarters, including several retired generals and prominent intelligence analysts, there is no sign of any flexibility in the administration's policy towards Iraq and its military strategy in the region.

Just two weeks ago, the House of Representatives passed a motion backing the president's handling of the war and rejecting a deadline for recalling U.S. forces.

With the Senate having already rejected the troop withdrawal plan, the House motion was passed 256-153 on a party-line vote. The House also endorsed a resolution rejecting "an arbitrary date for the withdrawal or redeployment" of troops.

Signers of the peace declaration have said if their demands are not met by the administration and the Congress towards the end of this phase of civil disobedience, they will organise another round of nonviolent actions beyond September.

"The breath and depth of actions taking place this week is a testament to the growing sentiments of the people of this country," said Leslie Cagan of United for Peace for Justice, a national antiwar coalition, who was arrested in Washington last week. "They are against the occupation of Iraq."

Since the invasion of Iraq started in March 2003, at least 100,000 Iraqis have died as a result of the U.S. military action and the subsequent suicidal attacks carried out by insurgent forces. The war has cost the United States billions of dollars and more than 2,500 human lives.

According to the latest CNN poll conducted Sep. 22-24, 59 percent of respondents oppose the Iraq war, while 33 percent say things are going "very badly" for U.S. forces in the country.

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