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21 August 2007

Sir Ian Blair
Commissioner, Metropolitan Police
New Scotland Yard
Broadway
London
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Dear Sir Ian

Policing of the Camp for Climate Action

I am writing to express serious concerns about the policing of the Camp for Climate Action at Heathrow from 12 to 21 August 2007. These concerns include unprovoked violence by police against peaceful protestors, mass detention of lawful demonstrators including children and local residents, needless arrests, unjustified use of anti-terrorism and anti-harassment legislation for stop and search, and a disproportionate response to the event as a whole.

Police violence

I am particularly worried by the numerous reports I have received of police violence against unarmed and peaceful protestors. On the afternoon Sunday 19 August 2007, officers from both the Metropolitan Police and Surrey Police reportedly assaulted several non-violent demonstrators with truncheons as they attempted to travel across a field south of the climate camp in the direction of BAA offices, and there were more reports of violence by police against peaceful demonstrators – some resulting in injuries – later in the afternoon. I find it entirely unacceptable for violence to be used against peaceful protestors as a means of crowd control.

Lack of identity

A number of the officers involved in the violence had removed their police identification numbers and were wearing balaclavas to conceal their faces, and refused to give their numbers when requested. This practice prevents accountability, as it is impossible to identify the officers involved. I should like an explanation as to why officers were allowed to participate in the policing of the demonstration while concealing their identities.

Mass detention

Local residents and parents have also complained about the heavy-handed response to the 'kids and residents' demonstration, which marched from the climate camp to Harmondsworth on the morning of 19 August 2007. Participants reported that the march was cordoned off by police, and a number of people requesting to leave the march (including children who needed to use the toilet) were prevented from doing so. Others who were not part of the march were forcibly pushed into the crowd and prevented from leaving. As was established by the 2004 High Court ruling on the unlawful detention of anti-war protestors travelling to RAF Fairford, mass detention is not justifiable unless there is a reasonable and immediate cause for suspecting a breach of the peace. I am concerned that the tactics used by police were a disproportionate response to a small-scale peaceful demonstration and may have been unlawful.

Arrests

There were a number of arrests during the Camp. Some of the arrests may have been appropriate; however I am concerned that a number were not justified. I have received reports that several people were arrested and then de-arrested once their names and addresses had been taken. Other participants reported being arrested for 'going equipped to cause criminal damage' for carrying harmless objects such as a wallet chain and a bicycle repair kit.

Stop and search

Dozens, if not hundreds, of stop and searches were carried out during the Camp for Climate Action. Again, I feel that this tactic was disproportionate to the event. I am particularly concerned that Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 was used for the purposes of public order policing, rather than for preventing terrorism. I am also concerned that many of those stopped and searched were threatened with arrest under Section 50 of the Police Reform Act 2002 if they did not provide a name and address. This legislation was enacted to deal with anti-social behaviour and harassment, and I am concerned that it was being used to record the details of those attending the Climate Camp without specific evidence of anti-social behaviour.

Cost

More broadly, I feel that the both the scale of Operation Hargood (reportedly involving up to 1800 officers at a cost of £7m) and the tactics used were disproportionate to this peaceful event and were not in keeping with earlier commitments towards facilitating lawful protest and minimising disruption to the local community.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Jones

Green Party Member of the London Assembly
Member of the Metropolitan Police Authority