

## **Protest shuts down clerics' visit**

**Toronto and Regional police gather at UW in case of trouble**

MIRKO PETRICEVIC

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Dozens of irate protesters yelling "shame," "murderers" and "terrorists" shouted down a Waterloo meeting last night that was intended to build peace.

About 50 protesters stood around the meeting hall at Conrad Grebel University College waiting for the dialogue between Mennonites and Muslim clerics from Iran to begin.

Police from Waterloo Region and Toronto, Waterloo firefighters, paramedics and University of Waterloo police were called in in anticipation of protests.

They arrived around 6 p.m., winding down their operations by about 9:10 p.m., after most protesters had left the Conrad Grebel parking lot.

Dozens of Toronto officers remained on standby throughout the evening, staged in a nearby parking lot, but weren't required to assist Waterloo police, Waterloo regional police Insp. Bryan Larkin said.

"Everybody has a democratic right to protest," Larkin said. "The underlying issue here is public safety, and our role here was to maintain the peace."

The Toronto convoy -- including several cruisers, a specialized paramedic unit and a bus carrying riot squad officers from the Public Safety Unit -- left before 9:30 p.m.

The protesters, Iranians and Afghans from the Greater Toronto Area, stayed mostly silent during the opening prayers.

They shuffled around and held aloft a gruesome photo gallery of torture victims, hangings and firing squad executions they say were taken in Iran.

But less than a minute into a talk by a Shiite Muslim cleric from the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran, the barrage of shouts erupted.

One by one at first, then hitting a crescendo of chanting "Down with the Islamic Republic of Iran!"

Rev. Brice Balmer, moderator of the meeting tried to calm the loud crowd.

"This is a religious conference," he pleaded.

But it was to no avail.

The verbal salvos kept flying from around the room while more than 100 people in the audience calmly waited for the meeting to continue.

After about 10 minutes, and some failed attempts to negotiate for the protesters to have their say, organizers called off the meeting.

Members of the panel rose from their table on the stage and headed for a side door -- the cat-calls turned into cheers.

"We made our point" said Rahmen Nejati, one of the more vocal protesters. "They are not welcome in Canada."

The commotion rippled halfway across the city. Waterloo mayor Brenda Halloran was pulled out of a city council meeting to be informed of the protest and councillors later met behind closed doors to discuss the event.

The city mobilized its fire department to boost the police presence, Halloran said.

The public meeting, a discussion dubbed Two Peoples, Two Faiths in Dialogue, was part of a nine-year peace-building project between the Mennonite Central Committee and the religious institute in Iran.

The conference has drawn criticism from groups and individuals who vehemently oppose contacts with the institute because its director, Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, is considered to be an anti-democratic, ultra-conservative cleric who promotes human rights violations in Iran.

Yazdi is reputed to be the lead spiritual adviser to Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has outraged many people by calling the Holocaust a myth and declaring that Israel must be wiped off the map.

Protesters argued that the speakers from Iran are part of the Iranian government and are responsible for human rights abuses.

As protesters revelled in shutting down the meeting, members of the audience lamented the disruption.

"They acted violently in a very barbaric fashion," Idrisa Pandit said of the protesters. Pandit, a Muslim woman wearing a black head scarf, said the protesters were not fighting for her rights as a woman.

"They hate Islam and that surely speaks about why they would try to prevent dialogue," she said. "There is absolutely nothing in any of their intentions to promote dialogue and peace-building."

Nejati, one of the protesters said the Iranian clerics don't deserve to have free speech because their ideology supports terrorism.

Arli Klassen, executive director of Mennonite Central Committee Ontario which is co-hosting the conference, said she wasn't surprised at the outcome of the meeting. "I'm disappointed that we couldn't talk civilly and peacefully."

The conference will continue.

"We expect that there will be a heavy police presence to make sure that that happens," she said.

Larkin said police will monitor the upcoming closed sessions as the conference continues.

Yesterday's meeting was one of three public forums scheduled during the conference. Sunday's was cancelled because of slight delays in obtaining visas. A public meeting which had been scheduled for Thursday, in Toronto, was cancelled because of security concerns, Klassen said.

[mpetricevic@therecord.com](mailto:mpetricevic@therecord.com)

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