

Only 'virtual protests' allowed at North American summit

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OTTAWA -- Protesters will be "seen and heard" when North American leaders meet next week in Montebello, near Ottawa, but only virtually -- via an audio-video feed set up by organizers.

And the heads of the United States, Canada and Mexico may opt to change the channel.

The arrangement is "in compliance with (a Canadian) court's decision that protesters have a right to be 'seen and heard,'" said Sandra Buckler, a spokeswoman for host Stephen Harper, the prime minister of Canada.

However, the novel plan to give protesters a voice, while maintaining strict security for the talks, has riled protesters being kept out by a fence, three meters (10 feet) high and 2.5-kilometers (1.5 miles) around the meeting place.

"It's a travesty of democracy," Sophie Shoen of People's Global Action told Agence France-Presse. "We must be allowed to directly confront political leaders where and when we choose, not virtually."

The hundreds of demonstrators expected to try to disrupt the summit "must be able to make their protests heard by the leaders they are addressing," echoed Grace Pastine, of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association, in a statement.

"They must be allowed to protest in Montebello," a luxury log-cabin hotel nestled in a lush forest between Ottawa and Montreal, she said.

In defiance, several anti-globalization groups said they planned to try to get as close to the meeting site as possible, refusing to be "caged" in a forest clearing set up for them by summit organizers.

A parallel counter-summit uniting academics and opposition MPs is also planned in Ottawa.

A senior Canadian government official said at a briefing: "Protesters have a right to protest and make their view known ... (but) it remains our view that what they don't have a right to do is to preclude leaders from meeting.

"We will take the steps necessary to ensure that leaders can meet and that protesters will have an opportunity to protest," she said.

During the two-day summit, held annually since 2005, Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper, US President George W. Bush and Mexico's President Felipe Calderon are expected to discuss current market turmoil, trade and security, and strategies to stem pandemics.

As well, they may confer on product safety, following recent recalls of toys, dog food and toothpaste, and growing worries about defective "made in China" goods, imported into North America.

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"The (US) president is going to Canada to talk to our North American neighbors about making the continent safer and more prosperous," said White House national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe.

Bilateral Bush-Harper talks would also touch on climate change, unrest in Afghanistan, and competing Arctic claims by Canada, the United States, Russia, Denmark and Norway, officials said.

The Arctic "has been very much in the news over the last few weeks and it's an issue that's very important to Canada," a senior Canadian official said. "It would surprise me if the leaders did not spend (some) time talking about (it).

"They may want to explore what lies beyond the symbolic act on the part of the Russians," she said, after Moscow planted a flag on the sea floor at the North Pole in early August to bolster its Arctic grab.

Calderon, meanwhile, is likely to ask for more US aid to curb drug trafficking, and propose a hike in the number of temporary worker visas issued by Canada to Mexican seasonal workers, now at 12,000 annually.

Activists, labor groups, academics and opposition politicians are decrying the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP), a framework for greater trade and security integration of Canada, the United States and Mexico.

It was launched at the first "Three Amigos" summit in Waco, Texas, in March 2005, but seems to have stalled.

A Canadian official commented: "I don't think there is any intent to look for deeper integration (of North America)" at these talks.