

Japan follows Singapore in dealing with foreign activists

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Trade, climate change, skyrocketing oil prices, and debt have been the topics of discussion in the parallel civil society events to the Group of Eight Summit, but the issue that has drawn the greatest attention is the Japanese authorities' heavy handed approach to security for the official gathering.

21,000 police personnel have been deployed to the island of Hokkaido, most of them to the city of Sapporo and nearby Toyako, where the meeting will take place next week. Large numbers of them, including contingents of riot police dressed up in Darth Vader gear, were stationed along the route of the Peace Walk staged by several thousand protesters on Saturday, July 5. To show they meant business, police smashed the window of a vehicle and arrested two of its occupants for playing music that they said was interfering with their operations. One photojournalist and a participant in the demonstration were also apprehended.

That same morning, 24 activists were flown back to Korea after being held for over 24 hours at Hokkaido's Chitose Airport. Nineteen of them belonged to the international peasant group Via Campesina and four to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). As a result of this action, several events were disrupted, including a symposium on free trade agreements that I was supposed to speak at that had been organized by the Korean trade unionists who had been deported.

An unofficial list of those not given visas to Japan included two Bangladeshis, one Indian, and one Kenyan. Japanese immigration authorities still have to act on the visa applications of several other NGO activists. Susan George, one of France's leading intellectuals, was interrogated by immigration authorities in a small windowless room for four hours. Lidy Nacpil, chairperson of the Jubilee South-Asia Pacific, was subjected to the same petty questioning for three and a half hours.

It took nearly ten days after filing my before the Japanese Foreign Ministry agreed to give me a visa, and only after strong daily pressure from the G8 Action Network and other groups. Despite my possession of a visa, the border police still stopped me for questioning when I arrived at Narita International Airport on July 4. Peppered with silly questions, like why I was going to Sapporo and what qualifications I had to speak on the G 8, I finally told my interrogators that they should be the ones providing the answers since they had obviously been already briefed on my case by the Foreign Ministry. It was probably this staged display of great irritation that persuaded them to release me after an hour.

Having attended several parallel gatherings around previous G 8 summits, I can say that the border controls imposed on foreign activists by the Japanese government have been the most restrictive and punitive. Japan seems to be following the example of the Singapore government, which refused entry to and deported scores of civil society representatives who arrived to attend NGO events around the World Bank-International Monetary Fund Fall Meeting in September 2006. Some people say that the arrest and continuing detention of two Greenpeace activists in Tokyo about ten days ago on still vague charges is really connected to the security tightening around the G 8 summit.

It was this "Singaporeanization" of Japanese border policy that representatives of scores of civil

society organizations probably had in mind when they said in an open letter to Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda: “We are disappointed that Japan, as host of the G8 Summit, is criminalizing freedom of expression. It is unacceptable for Japan, the G8 or any other countries to prevent healthy, critical debates from taking place alongside international meetings where decisions are being made that will affect the lives of millions of people around the globe.”

P.S.

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