

Several people arrested, tractor-trailer lit aflame during protest against Eritrean government supporters, Charlotte police say.

February 18, 2024

By Matthew Ablon and Erika Williams,

WCNC Charlotte

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD) said the protest had civil rights issues at the core. Protesters dispersed around 9:30 p.m. Saturday, February 17,

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — A protest that closed off a section of a Charlotte street Saturday resulted in several arrests, and it was centered on global human rights issues in another country.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department confirmed in a post to X the protest was being held on private property on Monroe Road. Officers said up to 200 people were present in what was described as a civil rights protest regarding a cultural festival.

A WCNC Charlotte crew notes some protesters were standing outside the Morris Costumes shop earlier in the afternoon.

CMPD deemed the protest as unlawful since it happened on private property and that Morris Road was closed down from McAlway Drive to Alliance Drive. Officers said protesters have been told to leave and that anyone remaining could be subject to arrest.



Credit: WCNC



Credit: CMPD
CMPD deploys Civil Emergency Unit, Feb. 17, 2024.

The department later said officers used pepper spray shortly after 3 p.m. to get protestors out of the street. CMPD said the spray hit some protestors as well as some officers who were treated on the scene.

Around 4 p.m., CMPD said officers had arrested four people. Less than an hour later, the inbound lanes of Monroe Road had been reopened. The gathering was still ongoing, however.

Later in the evening, CMPD said three men were charged with impeding traffic, while a woman was charged with impeding traffic, citing a riot, and assault on a government official. She reportedly also had a firearm seized from her.

CMPD also said another firearm was seized and that three further protestors were arrested. Dispersal orders were given again as the department said the protestors were blocking the entrance to the business hosting the event.

Just after 7:30 p.m., CMPD said its Civil Emergency Unit was activated, but it was reportedly met with aggression from crowds. The department said it was working to contain the scene.

Around 8:15 p.m., police said crowds had set a tractor-trailer on fire, which was quickly doused by the Charlotte Fire Department. Another person was also arrested, bringing the total to eight.

CMPD later posted just after 9 p.m. that the event that was being protested had ended, and the participants had left. However, they said protestors still remained and had not yet left. Officers asked the public to avoid the area for the time being.

CMPD would later share that around 9:30 p.m. the protestors dispersed and that officers were clearing the scene. A press conference was held shortly after where more details were shared.

Officers said they were called to a business around noon because a group of people were blocking the entrance to it to try and prevent an event from happening. While the group of people putting on the event was eventually able to get in side, the protesting group remained outside for several hours. CMPD said some protestors threw things like sticks and bottles at officers as well.

Eventually, CMPD was able to negotiate with both the group hosting the event and the protestors. The event group was able to leave and protestors eventually dispersed.

During the news briefing Saturday evening, CMPD said they were unaware beforehand that a protest had been planned nor were they in the loop about the event. A spokesperson said they had made contacts during the incident both with protestors and the group hosting the event and would be doing follow-up work.

Vinroy Reid, who owns a business near the scene, told WCNC Charlotte the scene involved two groups of people. The group hosting the event was apparently supportive of the current Eritrean government, while the protesters were opposed.

Eritrea is located in eastern Africa, south of Saudi Arabia and on the Red Sea. The current president is Isaias Afwerki, who has held office since 1993.

Afwerki's government has been accused of human rights abuses in the past by non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch, who in 2023 said the Eritrean government represses citizens by imposing restrictions on freedom of expression, opinion, and faith, among others. HRW notes Afwerki closed all independent newspapers in 2001 and arrested 10 journalists who, as of 2023, have been held incommunicado. HRW also reports that elections have not been held since Afwerki assumed the presidency in 1993, when Eritrea also gained independence from Ethiopia.

John Stauffer, who is president of an organization called the America Team for Displaced Eritreans, told WCNC Charlotte events similar to Saturday's are being held all over the world.

Pro-Eritrean regime events are usually organized by expats and are supported by the Eritrean government, Stauffer said. He said the goal is usually to raise money to send back to Eritrea.

Often, these events are met by protests.

Protesters typically include former refugees or asylees who have previously suffered at the hands of Eritrean authorities while they lived in Eritrea, he said.

"It's important for the American press to understand and publicize the depths of the suffering in Eritrea, the message of the protesters and the breadth of the protests across the Western world," Stauffer added, explaining that many opponents of the regime refer to Eritrea as "the North Korea of Africa."

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