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Prostitutes protesting crackdown

BY LILA SARICK
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About 50 advocates of prostitutes' rights protested yesterday against a recent campaign of arrests, saying police are trying to sanitize the city before the economic summit begins Sunday.

Shouting "Take the streets, stop the sweeps," the protesters marched in front of Royal Canadian Mounted Police headquarters, urging non-prostitutes to join women on the streets in monitoring police activity.

"Police have gone after almost every girl and told them to get off the street for the summit," said Valerie Scott, a spokesman for the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes.

During the past 10 weeks, police have laid 343 charges against prostitutes for communicating and 380 charges against would-be clients, said Sergeant Phillip Wilson of the Metro Toronto Police morality squad.

The charges, laid in the area bordered by Bloor, Dundas, Sherbourne and Jarvis streets, were not related to the summit, he said.

Police, however, are preparing to handle a possible flood of arrests connected with activities opposing the conference.

The Public Complaints Commission office, which handles reports of police misconduct, has been requested by police to open from noon to midnight Sunday and to remain open until midnight weekdays during the summit.

Commission investigator Edward Singleton says it is the first time the office has extended its hours.

Opponents of the summit are planning an illegal march Sunday and four special bail courts will be opened to handle the anticipated flood of arrests.

Police appear to be concentrating on summit protesters and prostitutes, not the people who sleep in the city's parks and abandoned buildings, said Michael Shapcott, a worker with the Christian Resource Centre, which counsels the homeless.

"There's more of an air of illegality about street prostitution than about homelessness. . . . It may be easier (for police) to justify publicly picking up hookers than to justify picking up homeless people and street kids," he said.

A hotline to monitor summit-related arrests has received about a dozen calls a day since it opened last week. Most of the calls came from street workers who are trying to advise prostitutes and homeless people on how to avoid confrontations with the police, Mr. Shapcott said.

Ms Scott said that during the current campaign, prostitutes have received tickets for littering, not wearing a seatbelt and trespassing. Women who do not appear in court are served with bench warrants and can then be arrested and held until trial, she said.

"Politicians want to present a sterile image of the city. It's as if politicians think these foreign visitors are small-town kids and are going to be offended by prostitution," she said.