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# **United States. D.C. to pay \$8.25 million to settle suit over mass arrests during '02 demonstrations**

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## **United States. D.C. to pay \$8.25 million to settle suit over mass arrests during '02 demonstrations**

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The D.C. government and a nonprofit civil rights organization have settled a class-action lawsuit brought by hundreds of protesters and bystanders arrested during a downtown demonstration in 2002.

The District agreed to pay \$8.25 million to almost 400 protesters and bystanders to end the lawsuit over mass arrests in Pershing Park during World Bank protests, according to lawyers involved in the suit.

Police did not warn people to disperse before rounding them up Sept. 27, 2002, and some were hogtied and held for more than 24 hours before being released. Former D.C. police chief Charles H. Ramsey has apologized for the arrests.

It is the third settlement reached by the District in a mass arrest lawsuit in recent weeks. On Nov. 23, the District agreed to pay \$13.7 million to about 700 protesters arrested during a 2000 demonstration. It also agreed to pay \$450,000 to eight war protesters to settle a lawsuit filed after a 2002 detention and interrogation.

The protesters in all three suits have been represented by the Partnership for Civil Justice, a nonprofit civil rights organization.

The settlements send "a powerful message to police agencies throughout the country that you cannot engage in mass violations of constitutional rights without accountability and a heavy price to pay," said Mara Verheyden-Hilliard, a lead attorney for the group, adding that the payouts have set national records for such cases.

In a statement, the D.C. attorney general's office said it "is pleased to put this episode behind it and looks forward to working with plaintiffs on various initiatives that are intended to prevent any future peaceful public protest from becoming another Pershing Park event."

In addition to paying protesters, the District has agreed to do a better job of tracking mass arrests and to fund a computer system for logging and indexing evidence. The city is required to report its progress on those measures every six months to the Partnership for Civil Justice, Verheyden-Hilliard said.

In the \$13.7 million settlement, the District agreed to improve training for officers on First Amendment issues.

D.C. Attorney General Peter Nickles has been racing to settle the mass arrest cases because the city was expected to have a rough time before a jury. He was also under fire from a federal judge because the District mishandled evidence tied to the Pershing Park arrests.

Attorneys for the protesters have alleged that the District destroyed a key log of police actions that day and deleted portions of radio dispatch tapes. Attorneys for the city have conceded that the evidence has vanished, but they say it was not obliterated on purpose.

A report by a retired judge who investigated the matter expressed skepticism about the District's position and urged the city to investigate further.

The settlement reached Tuesday does not end the Pershing Park saga.

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Four bystanders rounded up by police that day are represented by separate lawyers and are not part of the class-action suit.

One of their attorneys, Jonathan Turley, said he is scheduled to meet with Nickles for the first time Tuesday to discuss a possible settlement. But he seems to be itching for a courtroom brawl.

"We are preparing for trial," Turley said.