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Antiwar Protests Commence in Washington

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Thousands of protesters against the war in Iraq are rallying today in Washington and other U.S. and European cities to demand the return of U.S. troops in what organizers hope will be the largest gathering since the war began more than two years ago.

President Bush wasn't around to hear the protesters, assembled just blocks from the White House, although his wife, Laura, was home hosting authors for a long-planned literary festival on the Mall. Bush had flown out of town to assess Hurricane Rita recovery efforts. Vice President Cheney was undergoing surgery at George Washington University Hospital to repair an aneurysm near his knee.

Protesters were coming from around the country to the Washington rally, arriving on buses, planes and cars, carrying signs that said "Bush Lied, Thousands Died," and "End the Occupation," among other messages.

Organizers hope today's rally and march will draw 100,000 people. The U.S. Park Police canceled all leave to deal with the rally, which comes the same weekend as the twice-yearly meetings in the U.S. capital of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

"We believe we are at a tipping point whereby the anti-war sentiment has now become the majority sentiment," said Brian Becker, national coordinator for ANSWER, one of the main anti-war groups coordinating today's events.

Cindy Sheehan, the California mother who drew thousands of demonstrators to her 26-day vigil outside Bush's Texas ranch last month, won a roar of approval when she took the stage before the march. Her 24-year-old son, Casey, was killed in Iraq last year.

"Shame on you," Sheehan admonished, directing that portion of her remarks to members of Congress who backed Bush on the war. "How many more of other people's children are you willing to sacrifice?"

She led the crowd in chanting, "Not one more."

The protest march, which is to start at the Ellipse south of the White House, will cross in front of the White House, a few blocks north, and then will traverse the city, finally ending where it began at the Ellipse.

Nearby, at the Washington Monument, an 11-hour concert, featuring folk singer Joan Baez, is scheduled to begin at 3 p.m.

In a hitch for some coming to the protest, 13 Amtrak trains running between New York and Washington were delayed for up to three hours Saturday morning for repair of overhead electrical lines. Protest

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organizers said that held up thousands coming to the rally.

Organizers said around 1 p.m. that the start of march, originally planned to begin at 12:30 p.m., was being delayed until those arriving on the Amtrak trains could make it to Washington. There were unconfirmed reports that more than 350 buses had been delayed as well.

Elsewhere, rallies were planned in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Florence, London, Rome, Paris and Madrid.

A crowd in London, estimated by police at 10,000, marched in support of withdrawing British troops from Iraq. Violent clashes between insurgents and British troops in the southern Iraq city of Basra in recent days highlighted the need to get out, protesters said.

"Enough is enough," said Lindsey German, an official of the Stop the War Coalition, which organized the London march. "It is now time, once again, for the British people to step forward into the streets and insist that this time we will not be ignored."

Counter demonstrations also were planned.

Gary Qualls, 48, of Temple, Tex., whose Marine reservist son, Louis, died last year in the insurgent stronghold of Fallujah, spoke at a rally near the U.S. Navy Memorial in support of continued U.S. involvement.

"If you bring them home now, who's going to be responsible for all the atrocities that are fixing to happen over there?" he asked. "Cindy Sheehan?"

Also at the rally, put on by Protest Warrior and other groups supporting Bush's policy, demonstrators denounced Sheehan as a mother exploiting her son's death.

"If I were to die in Iraq, I wouldn't want my parents to be like Cindy Sheehan," said Army National Guard Spc. Julie McManus, 20, of Drexel Hill, Pa., who was among more than 100 people holding signs. "I'd be ashamed of them."

McManus said she drove to Washington with her boyfriend; she wore a white tank top with the words "American Soldier" in black marker.

Protesters continued to arrive throughout the morning. At Freedom Plaza, near 13th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue in downtown Washington, dozens of charter buses were disgorging protests, among them Sister Maureen Metty, 66.

Metty stepped off a bus from Kalamazoo, Mich., at 8 a.m., arriving for what she said was her first-ever political rally. She carried a sitting stool, a backpack loaded with snacks, a toothbrush and toothpaste and a message from her fellow nuns -- a sign that said "Sisters of St. Joseph's for Peace."

"There were 250 sisters who wanted to be here today, but I'm the one they chose to send," she said. "I believe I'm supposed to be here today. This war is not right."

A bus from Lancaster, Pa., brought an eclectic crowd -- gray-haired men in shorts and black socks, grannies with needle-point purses and a young man with facial piercings and aqua hair. Ginny Dillio, who is in her

late 50s, wore a red-white-and-blue shirt that said "Patriots for Peace."

"I was marching in '68, and I'm back today," she said.

Dillio was with her husband, George, who said he was new to the protest scene. "She corrupted me," he explained.

Washington Post Staff Writers Jo Becker, Petula Dvorak and David Nakamura and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

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