About the G-20

The Group of Twenty (G-20), composed of nineteen nations and the European Union, was created in 1999 in response to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and to include emerging market-economies to take part in economic discussion and governance. Since its formation, the G-20 has held annual meetings to promote financial stability and to achieve sustainable economic growth and development for all economies. G-20 makes up 85 per cent of global gross national product (GNP), 80 per cent of world trade, and two-thirds of the world’s population. This results in the G-20’s great economic weight in the global world.

Issue

The fourth G-20 summit between the heads of government, took place in Toronto, Canada during June 26-27, 2010. Topics included sustainable and balanced economic growth, financial sector reform, international financial institutions reform, and the promotion of global trade growth. A major concern and challenge, however, prior to and throughout the summit was security.

The Canadian government invested close to one billion dollars on security related measures to protect world leaders and contain likely protests, a far higher sum than previous summits. These measures included a three-meter-high, four-mile-long, metal-link fence surrounding the summit site, an assembly of twenty-thousand police officers from across the nation, and other initiatives related to public safety and national defense. Despite these security efforts, mass protests, demonstrations, rallies, and marches occurred a week before the summit. A violent riot broke out on the summit’s opening day, causing vandalism to several businesses in downtown Toronto and police cars to be set on fire. Due to the scale of the protest and tactics employed by demonstrators, in particular the “black bloc” anarchists who utilized black hoodies making identification nearly impossible, mitigation was a challenge. Police officers used tear gas, rubber bullets, and batons to block and beat protestors and ultimately arrested a reported 1,100 people during these protests making it the largest mass arrest in Canadian history.

Today the city is still recovering from the events of what happened ranging from bystanders who were arrested and never charged to businesses still waiting for compensation. Toronto’s international reputation was tainted.

Lessons Learned

The Toronto G-20 protests were not unusual in that similar situations have occurred in the past in other countries hosting both the G-20 and similar meetings. Extensive security precautions were taken in Toronto in hopes of alleviating violent demonstrations. The result, however, was heightened aggravation. Large fences, traffic diversions, and a magnified security presence of police officers helped elicit the negative response in the Canadian public. More importantly, civil rights violations played a crucial role in the public perception of the meeting. Many of the protestors in Toronto were not necessarily protesting against the meeting itself or to bring awareness to issues. They were protesting to proclaim their right to protest and most were peaceful protestors and onlookers. The outcome was mass arrests, some warranted, most not. Out of the 1,100 people detained, 317 were charged and 24 convicted. A review of security measures, a protection of human rights, including the freedoms of expression and assembly, and a focus on transparency are issues that should be remembered for future meetings of G-20 and other international organizations.

Awareness for Hawai‘i

In November 2011, thousands of international government officials, corporate executives, and media will meet in Honolulu, Hawai‘i for the week long APEC meetings. Akin to the G-20 in Toronto, Honolulu law enforcement officials have raised security concerns about the summit. Based on the developments in Toronto, there is a greater awareness of the possibility of protests and demonstrations. People want to be heard and have their opinions listened to. What must be kept in mind during this summit is to allow for public input. The Toronto Summit focused on quelling the protests but Honolulu has a chance to bring together public opinion, respect for the freedom of speech, and encourage transparency. Protests themselves are not the problem, but as can be seen from Toronto, the problem forms when protests are extinguished by force and the liberties of the public are put into question.