

PROTESTS COUNTER NEO-NAZI RALLY - 4,500 BACK SOMALIS AGAINST RACIST CHURCH

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LEWISTON, Maine - As white supremacists preached their doctrine to a few dozen of the faithful yesterday, their neo-Nazi message was countered by an outpouring of about 4,500 people who converged on this city to promote tolerance.

From outside the National Guard armory, where the white separatist World Church of the Creator held a two-hour meeting, to the Bates College gymnasium, where an overflow crowd gathered for a pro-diversity rally, the presence of the neo-Nazis prompted a passionate demonstration that spanned generations and a broad range of interest groups.

Only one arrest was reported - a World Church opponent was charged with disorderly conduct - as the largest law-enforcement presence in state history formed a riot-ready wall at the two sites.

"I don't think we could have imagined it would go so well," said Phil Nadeau, the assistant city administrator.

The message of the World Church was confined to a small out-building at the armory, where about 45 supporters filled a room ringed by police. Church leader Matthew Hale was arrested in Chicago last week for allegedly soliciting the murder of a federal judge, but his chief deputy, Jon Fox, replaced him.

Fox and two other speakers used the meeting to vilify the 1,100 Somali refugees who have migrated to Lewiston, as well as Jews, top US leaders, and most established churches.

"Bringing these Somalians here is another Jewish plan to divide and conquer," said David Stearns of Portland, who wore a white beret as he delivered a nervous, rambling speech. "We will propagate our religion in any way possible. There is no stopping us. Do not bother."

The World Church of the Creator seeks a whites-only United States that would remove all minorities and Jews, and bar immigration.

Although no violence erupted, emotions were high among protesters outside the meeting. A handful of neo-Nazis who arrived on foot were confronted by angry skinheads and other protesters who tried to block their access to the meeting.

Rob Hoyt, 30, a self-described Portland skinhead, argued with one man wearing a swastika pin as he tried to walk to the meeting. Police needed to pull the man through the jostling crowd, and Hoyt was charged with disorderly conduct, authorities said.

The protesters, many of whom concealed their faces with scarves and masks, used a microphone to rail against the neo-Nazis and promote issues ranging from workers' rights and criticism of police, to attacking First Amendment protection of racist speech.

"I'm a hard-working American, and I think everyone deserves the chance to live here," said Nate Probert, 30, of Portland, who described himself as half-black. "I wanted to see the mental capacity of these guys."

One World Church supporter, who arrived in the bitter cold more than an hour before the meeting, described the neo-Nazis as heroes. "We're here in support of our brothers," said the man, a southern Maine resident who would not give his name. "It's about time we started taking pride in our race."

The rallies occurred nearly two years after the first Somali refugees migrated to Lewiston from other US cities in a search for low-cost housing, safe streets, and a family-friendly environment. What began as a trickle, however, soon became a steady stream as Somalis spread the word that Lewiston met their needs.

Across the city, Bates College's Merrill Auditorium, which holds 3,000, was filled to standing-room capacity and a racially-diverse crowd spilled outside during a 2 1/2-hour peace rally in support of the city's Somali community.

Among the security efforts in place was a bomb-sniffing dog that people had to walk past as they approached. And to get inside, they had to go through a metal detector.

In this insular city of 36,000 people, which is 95 percent white and overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, the speedy arrival of 1,100 Somali Muslims had no contemporary parallel in the country.

Lewiston welcomed the Somalis at first. But as general assistance payments increased, and schools grappled with the language and learning needs of hundreds of Somali children, some residents of this struggling mill city lashed out.

Anti-Somali signs were placed on one lawn, drive-by hecklers insulted the new immigrants on the poor streets where they lived, and rumors spread throughout this cash-strapped city that Somalis were being given free cars, exorbitant housing subsidies, and expedited access to welfare payments.

Despite the backlash, city officials, church leaders, and civic groups worked hard to dispel the myths and educate the public about the immigrants' culture and aspirations. Progress seemed to be made, and the national media spotlight dimmed as reaction to the Somalis' presence here turned from shock to acceptance.

Then, in October, Mayor Laurier Raymond wrote a letter asking that no more Somalis move to Lewiston, which he described as unable to afford services for them. The letter sparked an outcry, and Hale used the perception of an overburdened, pilloried white majority to schedule yesterday's rally.

"Everything had seemed to be calming down" before the letter, said John Clifford IV, president of the Greek Orthodox church here. "It was like a boil had been lanced."

Maine's US senators, Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, attended the peace rally at Bates, along with Governor John Baldacci.

"I'm really proud of you," the governor said, "and I'm proud of our state . . . We stand united as one Maine when it comes to neighborliness and tolerance. This is not a haven for any hate groups."

Many in the crowd, however, wore bright stickers asking "Where's the mayor?" - a reference to Raymond, who had scheduled a vacation in Florida.

To applause and cheers, Omar Jamal, executive director of the Somali Justice Advocacy Center in Minneapolis, called for the mayor's resignation.

At another rally later in the afternoon on the steps of City Hall, Jamal was joined by Ismail Ahmed, a college student and the spokesman for a newly formed political justice group representing Somalis in Lewiston.

"Since the mayor wrote his letter, the Somali community has been a target of hate groups and continues to live in fear. We are in a state of shock due to the lack of leadership of the mayor today," Ahmed said. "Therefore, we call for the resignation of the man."

He added that "we wanted him to be with us in solidarity against hate today."

Caption: PHOTO

1. More than 300 protesters (left) gathered outside the Lewiston National Guard armory yesterday to protest a rally inside sponsored by the World Church of the Creator, a white-supremacist group. Geraldine Hunt and her daughter, Jacinta, 13, of Auburn (right) listened during the anti-hate gathering. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS / ESSDRAS M SUAREZ

2. SEEKING TOLERANCE IN MAINE Jamil Zraikat of Jordan (left) and Somalian Hamida Suja of Portland joined thousands at a rally in Lewiston yesterday, held in opposition to a separate protest over Somali immigrants. / (PHOTO ON PAGE A1) / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / ESSDRAS M. SUAREZ

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