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War protesters close federal building

16 arrested in downtown Oakland as 300 blast U.S., Israel

By Heather MacDonald, STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND -- Sixteen anti-war protesters were arrested Thursday after staging a "die-in" inside the lobby of the Ronald V. Dellums Federal Building to protest spending tax money to pay for the Iraqi occupation and aid to Israel.

Following a rally featuring speeches, slogans and colorful banners outside the federal building in downtown Oakland, a group of protesters chanting slogans and clutching tax forms smeared with red paint locked arms and laid down in a circle inside the lobby.

As private security guards rushed to lock the doors to the federal building on Clay Street, the crowd, which swelled to about 300, pounded on the glass entryway chanting, "Occupation is a crime from Iraq to Palestine."

The protest shut down the federal building for several hours and frustrated dozens of people who had appointments Thursday afternoon with federal agencies, as well as last-minute tax-filers in need of forms and other help.

"This is an awful, messed-up day to do this," said Robyn Hubbard of Oakland, who came to the federal building to file for a tax extension. "It's very inconvenient, very frustrating."

That was the point, protest organizers said. People need to stop and think about how the Bush administration spends their money, especially on April 15, the deadline for filing income tax statements, said Jay Sordean of the Northern California War Tax Resistance.

"It is your solemn and patriotic duty to ask today whether you want your hard-earned money to pay for war and occupation in Iraq and Israel," Sordean said.

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The protesters, ranging in age from 20 to 57, were cited for blocking a public entrance and creating a disturbance, then released later in the afternoon, said Art Clabby, chief of staff for the Federal Protective Service.

The six men and 10 women arrested can plead guilty and pay a \$100 fine to resolve the charges or demand a trial. The charges carry a maximum sentence of six months in jail or a \$5,000 fine, officials said.

"In the last several weeks, we have seen the reality of the war in Iraq and it is up to us to end this oppressive occupation," said Rayan Elamine, the founder of SUSTAIN, Stop U.S. Tax Funded Aid to Israel Now.

Oakland police officers, who assisted federal officials, arrested the protesters, handcuffing most of them with white plastic ties and frog marching them into a holding room in the federal building. Several refused to comply with officers' orders and were picked up and dragged away. No one was injured.

Julia "Butterfly" Hill, who drew international attention a few years ago for living in the canopy of an ancient redwood tree for 738 days, urged protesters not to be dismayed by criticism from those who oppose their views. Hill's protest saved the tree from being chopped down.

"True peace and true justice cannot come at the tip of a gun," Hill said, holding a bit of greenery. "Please do not be afraid to swim up the stream of the status quo."

Last year, Hill refused to pay the Internal Revenue Service nearly \$100,000 in taxes from a lawsuit settlement. It is among the largest single act of war tax resistance in history.

"I do not want to pay for another person to die," Hill said.

Other speakers at the rally expressed anger at President Bush's decision to shift American policy in Israel by endorsing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip while retaining some settlements in the West Bank.

"Bush and Sharon met yesterday at the White House to determine the fate of millions of Palestinians, yet the Palestinians were not invited," said Mahrehah Silmi. "They are both war criminals."

E-mail Heather MacDonald at hmacdonald@angnewspapers.com.

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