

LAPD begins crowd training

Sessions response to May Day melee

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Under pressure from civil-rights groups, the LAPD began training all its officers in crowd control Tuesday to avoid a repeat of the May Day melee in which women, children and reporters were shoved and shot at with rubber bullets during an immigration-rights rally.

The 10-hour session at the Joint Forces Training Base in Los Alamitos - dubbed the 21st Century Mobile Field Force Training Doctrine - came after complaints from civic groups and police union officials that many of the officers involved in the May 1 clash with demonstrators at MacArthur Park had not been properly trained.

"If we are going to learn lessons from MacArthur Park, training is not the only issue, but it's a significant one," said John Mack, the former Urban League head who now is president of the five-member Los Angeles Police Commission.

Dozens of people, including news reporters covering the event, were wounded May 1 when riot gear-clad officers fired rubber bullets into a crowd that included women and children.

Videotaped images of the altercation were broadcast around the world, creating an uproar that forced Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton to publicly apologize and caused Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to cut short a trade mission in Mexico.

Bratton subsequently reassigned two of the commanders in charge of overseeing the demonstration.

On May 30, he announced that Deputy Chief Mike Hillman would head a newly formed unit that would focus on crowd control. Over the next nine months, more than 5,000 officers will be trained in skills ranging from the use of batons to the placement of officers at demonstrations.

"This is only one part of the many changes that we will go forward with in the next several months," Bratton said. "We are totally changing the way we train personnel."

Officials with the Los Angeles Police Protective League were unavailable for comment Tuesday.

Hillman said a key to the training is teaching police how to strategize and plan for contingencies.

A preliminary internal investigation found that the LAPD's command structure and coordination broke down May 1. Police said they were under attack from a small group of agitators throwing rocks and bottles, but they failed to isolate or arrest the offenders. There was no media safety zone, as is LAPD policy, and it was unclear who provided commands to sweep everyone from the crowded park.

Inspector General Andre Birotte, who is conducting one of three investigations into the clash, said it could take several more months for authorities to identify which officers used force that day.

So far, only the two top commanders have been disciplined and several in the department say it could be at least until the end of the year before any officers are identified.

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