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# Iraq war activists to get £4,000 compensation over 2003 protest

Judge says coaches of law-abiding demonstrators were illegally stopped and turned back by police officers



A US B52 bomber bound for Iraq is loaded at RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire in 2003. The judge said preventing the protesters from reaching the airbase encroached on their civil rights. Photograph: Martin Argles for the Guardian

**Owen Bowcott**, *legal affairs correspondent*

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Anti-war protesters who were prevented by police from attending a mass rally outside an RAF airbase have been awarded more than £4,000 each in compensation.

A county court judge in London ruled on Friday that officers had no powers to stop coaches heading towards Fairford at the start of the Iraq conflict in 2003.

Their action in turning the protesters around at Lechlade in Gloucestershire, a few miles short of the airfield, and sending them back to London "was an interference with the right of ordinary citizens to go about their business", Judge David Mitchell said.

His ruling means that each of the 12 test cases brought by the campaigners will now lead to compensation payments of between £4,200 and £5,100. There were 159 protesters on the coaches in 2003; many of those are now expected to pursue claims.

As long ago as 2007, the House of Lords ruled that the police's refusal to let one of the demonstrators, Jane Laporte, reach Fairford was unlawful. The latest round of cases began when Gloucestershire police declined to pay compensation.

In 2003, RAF Fairford was being used by the US air force for long-range bombing missions against Iraq at the beginning of the conflict. Most of the protesters were stopped by police at Lechlade, told to leave the coaches by police, searched, told to get back on the coaches and sent back to London under a police escort.

In his decision, Mitchell said: "I have to ask myself, as I watched that [video] clip, what powers the police had to do that, and the answer is absolutely none.

"Whatever may have been the police's concerns about three coaches of protesters must surely have been allayed within minutes of the arrival of these coaches at Lechlade.

"The vast majority of them ... were decent hardworking people who had never been in trouble with the police ... to my mind their intentions were epitomised by gentlemen who had a beard and appeared to be about 60 years of age getting off one of the coaches with a sign attached around his neck.

"The sign read 'Wanstead Quakers - we totally oppose War. No ends can ever justify such means.' Surely the police officers dealing with this situation on the ground must have realised that they were not dealing with practised, hardline anarchists?"

The claimants were represented by the law firm Bindmans. Saimo Chahal, head of the company's civil liberties and social welfare department, said: "[When the] protesters set out from London ... few could have thought that their own civil rights to protest, and liberty, were about to be violated on a huge scale and less still that their journey to secure justice from the police force responsible would take a decade to resolve.

"The police flouted the law and showed scant regard for the democratic process. Those are not my words but what the judge found."

Jesse Schust, one of the successful claimants, said: "When I think of the day we were illegally detained by the police, it still upsets me. I hope this judgment will serve to discourage the police from taking such measures in future. It has taken 10 years to reach this vindication of our rights. There are some coach passengers who have passed away in this decade and I wish they were here to celebrate this important moment."

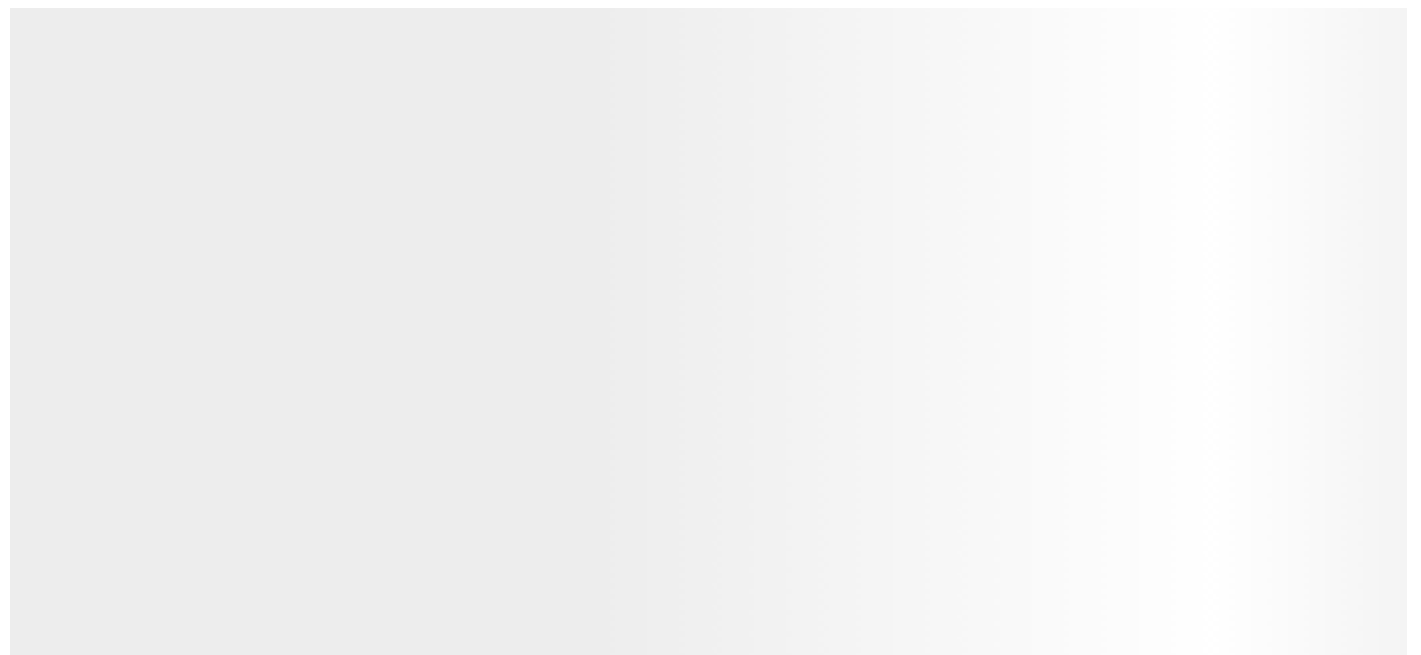
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