News

Hundreds of demonstrators calling for a cease-fire in Gaza gathered in the U.S. Capitol's Cannon House Office Building rotunda on Oct. 18. The group was primarily organized by Jewish Voice for Peace. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

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Hundreds of demonstrators, most of them Jewish, have been arrested on Capitol Hill while staging a protest calling on Congress and President Joe Biden to push for a cease-fire between Israeli and Hamas forces in Gaza.

The demonstrators, primarily organized by the group Jewish Voice for Peace, poured into the Cannon House Office Building on Oct. 18. Adorned in black shirts that read "Jews say ceasefire now," the group was part of a larger push by an array of religious groups and secular leaders to urge the U.S. government to advocate for a cease-fire as violence continues to rage in Gaza.

The demonstrators filled the building's rotunda, sat down and began singing, praying and chanting slogans such as "Cease-fire now!" and "Jews against genocide!" One protester led the demonstrators — which included several rabbis — in a call-and-response chant that urged Biden and Congress to "use their power" to "de-escalate Israel, to defund the occupation, to stop a potential genocide."

The group concluded: "As people of faith (we) say: Cease-fire now! Not in our name!"

A Capitol Police spokesperson said "upwards of approximately 300 arrests" were made during the demonstration, which lasted into the evening.

The protest comes as Israel has launched airstrikes into Gaza and prepares an expected ground assault in response to a wave of attacks by Hamas militants into southern Israel last week, which left around 1,400 Israelis dead and at least 200 kidnapped.

More than 3,400 Palestinians have been killed amid the violent conflict so far, prompting hundreds of thousands to flee to the southern sections of the Gaza Strip to escape Israel Defense Forces. Human rights groups warn that the mass displacement is creating a humanitarian crisis, leaving thousands without access to resources such as clean water.

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Demonstrators huddled on Capitol Hill also voiced outrage at the destruction of an Anglican hospital in Gaza on Oct. 17, a horrific loss of life that both Hamas and the

Israeli government have blamed on each other. (Biden, speaking in Israel on Oct. 18, suggested a Palestinian militant group was to blame, citing U.S. military intelligence.)

Among the demonstrators was Rabbi Linda Holtzman, who is based in Philadelphia and serves on the faculty of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. In a news conference and a separate interview with Religion News Service before the protest, she said she was one of at least two dozen rabbis who had come to the Capitol to participate. She framed their participation as a matter of faith.

"We are united in knowing that our Judaism calls us to stand up for justice, and to demand that our government do whatever possible to bring about a cease-fire to end the killing," she said.

She also, like many speakers and demonstrators, used the term "genocide" to describe the potential impact of a land invasion of Gaza by Israeli forces.

"I believe that demanding justice for all is at the heart of what it means to be Jewish," she told reporters. "When I see a genocide happening, all of those values are strong and are clear to me and demand that I speak out."

Participants in the protest played guitars and blew shofars as they sang songs in English and Hebrew for at least three hours. In addition to a heavy police presence — officers could be heard shouting for more support early on in the protest — congressional staffers and members of Congress filtered in and out, peeking over banisters to observe as police slowly began to arrest members of the sizable group.

At one point, Republican Rep. Brandon Williams of New York stood on a balcony above the protest and lifted an Israeli flag. Williams did not respond to requests to clarify the significance of the action.

Capitol Police arrest demonstrators urging the U.S. government to advocate for a cease-fire in Gaza outside the Cannon House Office Building on Capitol Hill on Oct 18. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

The sit-in was preceded by a rally with thousands of demonstrators on the National Mall. Among the speakers was Rabbi Brant Rosen, who serves Tzedek Chicago, a congregation that describes itself as an "intentional Jewish congregation based on core values of justice, equity and solidarity."

"We will not allow our grief to be used as a weapon of war, as a justification for the murder of children, innocent people in Gaza," Rosen, who was later among those arrested, told the crowd.

Democratic lawmakers also spoke at the event on the Mall, including Rep. Rashida Tlaib, the only Palestinian American in Congress. Growing visibly emotional over the course of her speech, Tlaib mourned the loss of life among Israelis and Palestinians but criticized Biden's response thus far.

"As a Palestinian American, and also someone of the Muslim faith, I'm not going to forget this," she said.

She was followed by Rep. Cori Bush, who noted that she introduced a resolution on Monday calling for a cease-fire. In addition to several who signed on initially, she said, at least 11 more lawmakers have voiced support for the petition since.

The actions on Capitol Hill were a continuation of protests from Oct. 16, when large groups of mostly Jewish demonstrators organized by If Not Now rallied outside the White House. Demonstrators blocked White House entrances and eventually spilled into the street, ultimately resulting in dozens of arrests.

The calls among Jewish groups for the U.S. government to push for a cease-fire have been echoed by a broad coalition of religious organizations, with Muslim groups, Quakers, mainline Protestant groups, Black Protestant denominations and others all publishing letters with similar messages this week.

On Oct. 18, demonstrators who were arrested continued to dance and chant as they were led away by police. As a group was being escorted into police vehicles on the street outside the Cannon building, supporters shouted at them from the sidewalk before eventually bursting into a song.

"In hope, in prayer, we find ourselves here," the supporters sang, with those in handcuffs dancing and singing back. "In hope, in prayer, we're right here."