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Epping Hotel Protest Descends into Violence, Police Report

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A protest outside the Bell Hotel in Epping, Essex, where asylum seekers are housed, spiralled into chaos on Sunday, with police condemning the outbreak of “mindless thuggery.” Six individuals were arrested as the demonstration, attended by over 1,000 people, saw bottles and smoke flares hurled at police vehicles.

The unrest follows the arrest last week of 38-year-old asylum seeker Hadush Gerberslasie Kebatu, charged with sexual assault after an alleged attempt to kiss a 14-year-old girl in the town. Kebatu denied the charge at Chelmsford Magistrates’ Court on Thursday. The incident

has fuelled a series of protests outside the hotel, with Sunday's gathering drawing significant numbers, including demonstrators from across the UK. One woman, who travelled from Scotland, told the BBC she felt compelled to "support local people and get the asylum seekers out."

Chief Superintendent Simon Anslow, leading the police response, expressed frustration at the escalation. "Our cells, which have been filling up throughout the evening, are ready for you," he said in a statement. "I think I speak for all of us, including the people of Epping, when I say we've had enough of your criminality."

The protest saw chants of "send them home" and "save our kids" as tensions boiled over. Projectiles were thrown at police vans blocking the hotel entrance, prompting officers to enact a Section 35 dispersal order to curb further crime and anti-social behaviour. A Section 60AA order was also enforced, requiring the removal of face coverings until 04:00 Monday, covering Epping and its tube station.

The disorder followed earlier unrest on Thursday, when eight police officers were injured, leading to three arrests. One man has since been charged with violent disorder and criminal damage. Amid Sunday's chaos, police escorted an elderly counter-protester to safety after she was followed and verbally abused by masked individuals.

Essex Police have vowed to take a hard line. A force spokesperson stated, "We will deal robustly and quickly with anyone intent on coming into Epping to commit selfish criminal behaviour. The right to peaceful protest is protected by law, but this must be done respectfully, and if there is a risk to public order, we will act appropriately."

The situation has raised concerns about community tensions, with the current Labour government's handling of asylum policy drawing scrutiny. Critics argue that housing asylum seekers in local communities without adequate consultation fuels distrust and unrest. As Epping grapples with these challenges, police are maintaining a strong presence to prevent further violence.