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## Met Rejects Calls to Scrap Live Facial Recognition at Notting Hill Carnival

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Metropolitan Police Commissioner Mark Rowley has rejected demands from civil liberties groups to abandon the use of live facial recognition (LFR) technology at this year's Notting Hill Carnival, setting the stage for a renewed clash over surveillance powers and policing tactics at one of London's largest cultural events.

Campaign groups including Liberty, Big Brother Watch, and Human Rights Watch had called for the controversial technology to be withdrawn, arguing that its deployment exacerbates racial bias, undermines civil liberties, and lacks the necessary regulatory safeguards. They warn that the use of facial recognition in such a diverse and crowded setting risks disproportionately targeting minority communities, eroding public trust in policing at a festival long associated with tension over stop-and-search practices.

Rowley defended the decision to continue with LFR, insisting that the technology has undergone significant improvements since its initial trials in 2016 and 2017, when it was heavily criticised for false identifications and accuracy problems. According to the commissioner, updated algorithms have reduced error rates and are applied in a far more

targeted manner. He stressed that the system is used solely to identify individuals wanted in connection with serious crimes, such as violent assaults and sexual offences.

The commissioner pointed to last year's carnival as evidence of the technology's effectiveness. In 2024, LFR was credited with contributing to 349 arrests throughout the event, which typically draws more than two million attendees across the August Bank Holiday weekend. Rowley argued that with crowds of such scale, traditional policing methods alone are insufficient to protect public safety. "Our priority is to prevent violence and keep people safe," he said. "Facial recognition helps us identify and detain individuals who pose a genuine risk to the public."

Critics remain unconvinced. Civil liberties advocates argue that the deployment of LFR has outpaced legislation, leaving a gap in oversight and accountability. While police maintain that the technology operates within the framework of the Equality Act and European human rights law, campaigners counter that no specific UK legislation governs its use, leaving questions about consent, proportionality, and independent scrutiny unanswered. "The public has never been given a meaningful say in whether mass biometric surveillance should be rolled out at all," said a spokesperson for Liberty.

Concerns about racial bias also continue to dominate the debate. Studies of earlier facial recognition systems found disproportionately high error rates when identifying people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Critics argue that even with improved accuracy, the technology still carries inherent risks of reinforcing discriminatory policing patterns, particularly at an event that celebrates Caribbean culture and has historically been the subject of heavy-handed policing tactics.

The government has so far supported the Met's use of LFR, portraying it as a valuable tool in modern crime prevention. Ministers have argued that as long as deployments are targeted and transparent, the technology can enhance security without infringing on fundamental rights. However, the absence of comprehensive primary legislation regulating facial recognition remains a sticking point for rights groups, who fear the piecemeal approach leaves too much discretion in the hands of police forces.

As preparations for the carnival continue, the debate reflects a wider national and international conversation about the use of facial recognition in public spaces. While supporters see it as a powerful law enforcement tool, opponents argue that it represents an irreversible expansion of state surveillance. For London's Caribbean community, the

decision to press ahead with the technology at the carnival raises fresh concerns about trust between police and residents, just as authorities seek to reassure festivalgoers of their commitment to safety.

The outcome of this year's deployment will likely shape the future of LFR in the UK. If the Met can demonstrate that the technology is accurate, proportionate, and effective in tackling crime without fuelling discrimination, its position will be strengthened. If controversy deepens, however, pressure for a statutory ban or stricter regulations may become harder for policymakers to resist.