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Violence Erupts in Epping as Protests Target Asylum Seeker Hotel

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Tensions boiled over in Epping, Essex, on Thursday evening as a protest outside The Bell Hotel, currently housing asylum seekers, descended into violence. The demonstration, attended by hundreds, including residents and far-right activists, followed a previous incident in which two security guards were seriously injured. The clashes highlight growing unrest in the town, where concerns over the hotel's use have been amplified by recent events.

The protest began peacefully, with local families, including women and children, joining activists wielding loudspeakers and banners. A flat-bed trailer displayed a sign reading “Protect Our Kids,” reflecting community anxieties. Among the crowd were members of Britain First, a far-right group that has been active in the area and local online forums. However, the mood shifted as a smaller counter-demonstration by anti-racism activists, including members of Stand Up To Racism, was surrounded by masked men, some as young as their early teens.

Essex Police reported that the situation escalated when projectiles, including plastic bottles, eggs, and flour, were hurled at officers and counter-protesters. The violence intensified as police vans were vandalised, with some protesters climbing onto vehicles and smashing windows. Riot police, equipped with helmets and shields, were deployed to restore order, blocking off Epping’s High Street for hours in a tense stand-off. One man was arrested on suspicion of affray, and suspects have been identified for assaults on officers, vehicle damage, and property vandalism.

The unrest follows a Sunday protest where two security guards were attacked at a nearby bus stop, an incident police are treating as racially aggravated. Both guards required hospital treatment for serious injuries. The protests were sparked by the arrest of Hadush Gerberslasie Kebatu, a 38-year-old Ethiopian asylum seeker, who was charged with three counts of sexual assault, inciting a girl to engage in sexual activity, and harassment without violence. Kebatu, who arrived in the UK by boat on 29 June, denied the charges at Chelmsford Magistrates’ Court and remains in custody awaiting trial.

Local Conservative MPs Neil Hudson and Alex Burghart have called for the immediate closure of The Bell Hotel and another local site used for asylum seekers, describing the situation as “increasingly alarming and distressing.” Chris Whitbread, leader of Epping Forest District Council, echoed this, arguing the Home Office’s decision to house asylum seekers in the hotel is “reckless” and strains community resources.

Weyman Bennett, co-convener of Stand Up To Racism, who attended the counter-protest, warned of the risks of escalating division. “It’s vital to stand against this kind of hatred, or we could see a pogrom-type movement take hold,” he told reporters. Meanwhile, a Libyan asylum seeker at the hotel, speaking to The Guardian, insisted residents felt safe despite the unrest. “We’re treated well and just want our cases heard,” he said.

The Home Office, under the current Labour government, defended its stance, stating that foreign nationals committing sexual offences are barred from asylum. A spokesperson added, “The right to protest is fundamental, but it must not cross into criminality. We’re working closely with Essex Police.” Critics, however, argue the government’s handling of asylum policy fuels local tensions, leaving communities like Epping to bear the consequences.

Enver Solomon, chief executive of the Refugee Council, called for phasing out asylum hotels, which he described as “flashpoints for tension” that burden taxpayers and trap migrants in limbo. A resident, speaking anonymously, expressed mixed feelings: “Most of us want the hotel to return to normal, but outside agitators are making things worse. New arrivals need better vetting and secure housing.”

Chief Superintendent Simon Anslow of Essex Police stressed that while peaceful protest is respected, criminal acts will face “robust” consequences. As security fencing was erected around the hotel, the town braced for further unrest, with the anniversary of last year’s Southport riots looming, where similar protests targeted asylum accommodations.

The Epping clashes expose deep community divides, exacerbated by far-right rhetoric and inadequate government policy. Without swift resolution, such flashpoints risk further eroding public trust and safety.