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Bravest's charges KOd

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Authorities are dropping charges against all but one of the 18 firefighters arrested after they clashed with cops during a protest at the World Trade Center site.

"What happened at Ground Zero a week ago Friday is unacceptable. I am very, very hopeful that it will not happen again. But we want to be able to put this behind us, so that we can move ahead," Mayor Giuliani said at City Hall yesterday.

"It seemed like the right answer was to give them a break . . . and I think we certainly can justify it," he said.

Charges will remain against one firefighter accused of hitting a police officer.

The scuffle broke out during a protest by about 1,000 firefighters furious at an Oct. 30 decision to limit the number of FDNY rescuers at the scene to 25 at any one time. Five police officers were injured in the melee.

Officials said the restriction was based on safety concerns, but the Bravest, who lost 343 firefighters in the twin towers attacks, assailed it as a betrayal of their dead brothers. The policy was changed so that 50 firefighters could search for remains.

Extraordinary

Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen asked Giuliani Friday to consider dropping the charges. That day, the two also met with families of emergency workers who perished in the Sept. 11 attacks.

"I don't like the idea, ever, of dropping cases," Giuliani said. "But I think that these are very, very extraordinary circumstances."

Giuliani said the line remained drawn at assault, however, and added that "among other things, it is inconsistent to say that you believe that Ground Zero is hallowed ground, and then engage in illegal and violent behavior at Ground Zero."

An assault charge against Firefighter Sean Nealon is active, a police spokesman said.

The 17 other cases mainly involve charges such as criminal trespass.

Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau said he would move for dismissal early this week.

Von Essen, who previously called the brawl disgraceful, said he was glad to see leaders prepared to "at least make these [charges] go away, to start trying to get this situation back to normal."

Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik, who vowed after the Nov. 2 incident, "You're not going to assault a cop and get away with it," said he hoped police and firefighters could maintain the camaraderie they'd shown in the aftermath of Sept. 11.

A Uniformed Firefighters Association spokesman said the union backed the decision to drop the charges.

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