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17 ground zero brawlers off the hook

By ANDY GELLER
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The city decided yesterday to drop charges against all but one of the 18 firefighters busted after an angry ground zero protest in which the Bravest overturned barricades and battled with New York's Finest.

However, charges will remain against a firefighter accused of assaulting a cop.

On the eve of the two-month mark of the terror attacks on the Twin Towers, Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau said he agreed to Mayor Giuliani's request to drop charges against 17 firefighters accused of criminal trespass and harassment.

The DA said he made the decision "in light of the extraordinary heroism of the firefighters and Police Department members at ground zero."

Giuliani said, "It seemed like the simplest thing to do was to give them a break. This was the right thing to do."

The 18 were arrested after firefighters battled cops at a Nov. 2 rally to protest the city's decision to reduce the number of Bravest working at ground zero. Five cops were injured.

Giuliani said he decided to ask that the charges be dropped after meeting Friday with eight of the families of the 343 firefighters killed in the Sept. 11 attacks.

"We have concern for the pain and confusion of the families. We don't want to do anything to add to their pain," he said.

Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen, who first proposed the idea to Giuliani, said, "This time, this eight weeks, has really caught up to a lot of people. I'm just glad that the police and the district attorney and the mayor have agreed to at least make these go away."

Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik said firefighters and cops have been "working side by side day and night" since Sept. 11 and "we should really work on continuing that camaraderie."

Giuliani's decision to reduce the number of Bravest working at ground zero to 25 angered firefighters because the bodies of many of their dead colleagues have not been recovered. The number was increased to 50 on Thursday.

Tom Butler, a spokesman for the Uniformed Firefighters Association, said the union supported the dropping of the charges.

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