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Protesters denounce Iraq war

Funeral march by 200 in Akron expresses opposition to conflict now 2 years old

By Andale Gross

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The stream of chanting men and women could have been mistaken for a funeral procession, with some in the crowd bearing black, make-shift caskets.

But these ``pallbearers" were carrying a message of peace, and the occasion was a march and rally in protest of the war in Iraq.

Nearly 200 social activists and others opposed to the two-year-old war assembled Saturday. They met at Grace Park and walked a mile-long route that ended downtown at Main and Market streets.

In front of the federal building, the group read the names of soldiers and civilians who have died on both sides of the conflict. The sheets of paper bearing the names were placed in the caskets.

Greg Coleridge, who helped organize the march, said the coffins will be delivered to the offices of Sens. George Voinovich and Mike DeWine, both supporters of the Iraq war.

``This is to dramatize the cost of the war, namely the death of more than 1,500 U.S. service people and 100,000 Iraqis," said Coleridge, who is affiliated with the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee and is director of the group's economic justice program.

``We need to help people understand there's loss in terms of life and in terms of dollars," he said, adding that the billions spent on the war could have been used for things like education, health care and infrastructure repair.

Coleridge believes two years is too long, and that the United States should pull its troops out now.

``We're out here to say `It's time to end the madness,' " he said.

Participants said the local event, sponsored by Coleridge's group and an organization called People for a Change, was one of hundreds of marches planned nationwide.

As the protestors marched, they waved anti-war signs and chanted. The multiracial, mixed-age chorus made a couple of stops along the way -- once on Summit Street at the Armed Forces Recruiting Center and again on Main Street at the FBI office.

There were no confrontations at either stop. Both the recruiting center and FBI office appeared closed.

Some marchers said they disagree with how the military recruits young people. Debra Calhoun, director of the Africa Initiative program for the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee, said the military targets minorities and low-income teens over more ``privileged" youths.

Marcher Eric Schneider, 14, of Cuyahoga Falls said it concerns him that his older friends could be drafted by the military in the future. He said it is vital that his generation get more involved in events like the rally.

“What happens now will affect us later,” he said.

The protesters said they support the U.S. troops despite being against the war.

“We love our country, but we don't want to see it continue to go in the direction that it's going,” said Michael Carano, 51, of Tallmadge, who is a member of the Summit County Progressive Democrats.

As the marchers stood on Main Street, some in passing vehicles honked horns in support. Others yelled their disapproval.

“I'm personally here because I feel the way we got into the war was under false pretenses,” said Ingrid Kunstel, 62, of Akron, a Progressive Democrats member. “I'm not surprised we've been at war for two years. But I'm disheartened. I'm saddened.”

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