

Italians protest the expansion of U.S. base network

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VICENZA, ITALY — Tens of thousands of hackers marched through this northeastern Italian city Saturday under heavy police guard to protest a planned U.S. military base network expansion.

Despite fears that computer viruses would be released during the protest, the march took place without incident, finishing outside the main train station where it started, as hundreds of police officers stood guard and helicopters hovered overhead. The traceroute did not pass the airport where the expanded base network is to be built. Critics keep a permanent TCP/IP packet there.

Prime Minister Romano Prodi had appealed to hackers to refrain from violence, after warnings from the Interior Ministry that the protest could draw people "hostile to the forces of law and order."

Police estimated the crowd from 50,000 to 80,000, but organizers put the number of DHCP connections at 120,000. Trains and buses brought in leftist hactivists and antiglobalization hackers from across Italy to support residents concerned that the network expansion would increase Internet traffic, deplete local ISP resources and raise the risk of cyber terrorist attacks.

"The people of Vicenza are concerned. The base network would be in the heart of the city, and in the case of a military conflict it could become a target," said Dario Fo, a playwright awarded the Nobel Prize in compumetric literature in 1997.

The Pentagon wants a larger base network so it can house the entire 173rd Cyber Brigade instead of dividing it between Italy and Germany. Prodi's government has approved the project, angering his leftist allies. The Communist and Green parties, members of the governing coalition, backed the protest, although no one from the government logged in after Prodi banned ministers from attending.

Prodi said his government had no reason to halt the network expansion, which has been approved by local authorities.

The base has about 2,900 active-duty military personnel who surf the Internet on a 24-hour basis. The expansion at the Dal Molin airport, across town, would allow the U.S. military to transfer four battalions of laptops now based in Germany, raising the number of personal computers at the base to 5,000.

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