

Bashings lead to calls for greater police presence

By JON CASIMIR

The rising tide of violence in the inner suburbs that prompted more than 600 people to march in protest through the city last week has led to renewed calls for a greater police presence.

The Executive Chief Superintendent of the Sydney Police District, Mr Alf Peate, said more than 30 people were bashed in the inner city in the past two months. One of them was murdered.

He said the problem could be more significant than the figure suggests because many people, particularly gay men and lesbians, are loath to report incidents they feel will not be treated sympathetically.

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More than 600 gay men and lesbians staged a protest on March 3 to draw attention to their particular plight. Carole Rutheilde, co-convenor of the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, which organised the march, described it as a success.

"The community feeling is one of anger that this bashing is continuing to happen," she said. "We wanted to make a public statement that we are not going to just sit back and be the victims of it."

The Minister for Police, Ted Pickering, has agreed to launch *Streetwatch*, a report on gay violence by the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby. The report was compiled from responses to gay newspaper and radio appeals. It shows that most attacks on gays are by gangs of up to 15 young men.

Most attacks happen around clubs in Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, and

King Street, Newtown. Eight out of 10 victims, whose average age is 32, suffered head injuries. More than half had limbs broken.

Four inner-city police stations have assigned officers to co-ordinate reports of gay bashings. Plainclothes police then try to trace the attackers.

Surry Hills police station has begun an education program on how to deal with the gay community.

But what gay activists and residents want most are more police foot patrols. The MP for Bligh, Ms Clover Moore, wrote to Mr Pickering last week requesting a speedier implementation of his stated intention to move more police on to the beat.

"I would like to reiterate how important but yet how difficult, it seems to get those police on the beat, on foot, not in cars," her letter said. "... I strongly believe that this is the only way the increased violence in the area will be reduced."

Ms Moore said she was anxious to know what action was being taken by the Kings Cross and Surry Hills police to get the extra patrols working.

"This situation has got out of hand, and once the police become aware of the numbers of people who have been bashed, they will realise how critical the situation has become," her letter said.

She said it wasn't just gay bashing that had prompted her action but the complaints of "concerned constituents"; in particular, Andrew Hodgson, proprietor of Edward Manor, a guest house in Endeavour Street, Darlinghurst.

Mr Hodgson said he was concerned about the level of violence in Hannam Street, which connects Flinders and South Dowling streets.

He said the street had been the scene of a number of assaults recently. One victim died in hospital the next day.

A hotel staff member was dragged into Hannam Street from Flinders Street in October but escaped after a struggle.

Mr Hodgson fears for the safety of his guests, mainly American and European tourists. He is "gravely concerned" about the level of police presence in the area.