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Another city agency keeps watch at S. Phila. High

By Kristen A. Graham
Inquirer Staff Writer

The racial violence at South Philadelphia High School last month has drawn the official attention of yet another government agency.

The Mayor's Commission on Asian American Affairs yesterday expressed "deep concern" over the Dec. 3 beatings of 30 Asian students by large groups of primarily African American pupils, and announced that it would monitor the situation at the school.

The advisory commission, which has no enforcement power, is at least the sixth authority to open an investigation, hold hearings, or focus an official eye on the school. They include the Philadelphia Police Department, the city and state Commissions on Human Relations, and Vietnam's deputy ambassador to the United States.

Nina Ahmad, chairwoman of the mayor's commission, called yesterday for monthly reports on immigrant education and multicultural affairs at South Philadelphia High and community meetings with city officials and Philadelphia School District administrators.

"We welcome opening up lines of communication to community groups who can help us" with solutions, said Evelyn Sample-Oates, a district spokeswoman.

Seven students required hospital treatment after the beatings. Ten - six black, four Asian - have been suspended, but more may still be punished.

Ahmad said the commission wanted to help the district address issues related to multicultural education and the plight of immigrant students.

"We're hoping that out of this horrific incident," Ahmad said, "there's a silver lining."

In addition to the police probe, investigations have been begun by the Pennsylvania Commission on Human Relations and by retired Judge James T. Giles, whom the district hired.

The city's Commission on Human Relations is holding public hearings on racial discrimination in schools.

In addition, Vietnam's deputy ambassador met with State Department officials last week to discuss the safety of Vietnamese students at South Philadelphia High and said he would watch the situation closely.



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Advocates for the Asian students have said they would file a federal civil-rights claim.

Sharp divisions between those advocates and Superintendent Arlene Ackerman were evident this week at a private meeting called by the state Human Relations Commission.

Ackerman said too much time was being spent on the case, according to those at the meeting. She said that she wanted finger-pointing to stop, and that while fixes were needed, the main issues were citywide violence and racial tensions.

The advocates contended that the district had long ignored racial strife and violence, and that district efforts to fix the problems at South Philadelphia High - more counselors, cameras, police, diversity training - weren't enough.

Contact staff writer Kristen Graham at 215-854-5146 or kgraham@phillynews.com.

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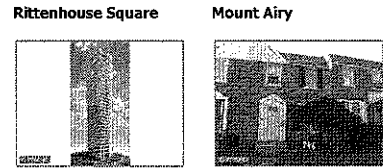
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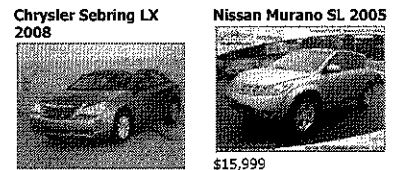
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