

HK police attack protest barricades

Written by Taipei Times

Wednesday, 15 October 2014 08:17 -



Police officers remove barricades of pro-democracy protesters in the Admiralty district of Hong Kong yesterday.

Photo: AFP

Hong Kong police yesterday vowed to tear down more street barricades manned by pro-democracy protesters, hours after hundreds of officers armed with chainsaws and boltcutters partially cleared two major roads occupied for two weeks.

In a concerted effort to reduce the territory held by protesters, police tore down barricades in the bustling shopping district of Causeway Bay and on the edge of the main protest encampment in Admiralty, near the city government's headquarters. They also vowed to target protester cordons in Mongkok, a working-class district known for its triad gangs, where violence has previously broken out.

Huge crowds have intermittently rallied against China's insistence that it will vet candidates standing for election as the semi-autonomous city's next leader in 2017 — a move protesters have labeled "fake democracy."

While the activists have been praised for their civility and organizational skills, they have also brought widespread disruption to an already densely populated city. Angry and sometimes violent scuffles have broken out between demonstrators and government loyalists, sparking accusations the authorities are using hired thugs to sow trouble.

Police had been keeping a low profile at the three main protest sites after a decision to fire tear gas at peaceful demonstrators on Sept. 28 caused outrage and encouraged tens of thousands to take to the streets.

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However, in the past two days, officers have begun probing protester defences in raids aimed at opening some roads to traffic, while allowing the bulk of demonstrators to stay in place. About 150 police dismantled metal barricades at the Causeway Bay site before dawn yesterday, freeing up traffic in one direction, but leaving the protest camp there largely intact.

Hours later, another contingent of officers tackled barricades at the main Admiralty site, using chainsaws to slice through bamboo poles and freeing up one of the multi-lane highways in the district.

At both sites protesters put up little resistance, sticking to their promise of non-violence.

Some protesters were seen sobbing as police went to work dismantling the barricades.

“We are only residents and students,” one tearful young woman shouted at police. “We will leave, as we are unable to fight you, but we will not give up.”

Police insisted they would soon turn their attention to Mongkok.

A similar clearance operation on Monday at the edges of the Admiralty protest camp prompted activists there to swiftly regroup.

They laid down cement foundations and built up bamboo pole barricades blocking both lanes of a highway, using everything from steel chains to plastic cable ties and sticky tape to strengthen them — even enlisting sympathetic construction workers for help.

However, police yesterday cleared them in less than an hour.

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Source: [Taipei Times - 2014/10/15](#)