

Hong Kong protesters march on station to 'educate' Chinese about their cause

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Protesters march in Hong Kong yesterday.

Photo: AP

Tens of thousands of anti-government protesters yesterday rallied outside a train station linking Hong Kong to China, the latest mass show of anger as advocates try to keep pressure on the territory's pro-Beijing leaders.

The rally was the first major large-scale protest since Monday last week's unprecedented storming of the Hong Kong Legislative Council by largely young, masked protesters — which plunged the territory further into crisis.

Hong Kong has been rocked by a month of huge marches as well as a series of separate violent confrontations with police, sparked by a bill that would allow extraditions to China.

The bill has since been postponed in response to the intense backlash, but that has done little to quell public anger, which has evolved into a wider movement calling for democratic reforms and a halt to sliding freedoms in the semi-autonomous territory.

Organizers said about 230,000 people snaked their way through streets in the harbor-front district of Tsim Sha Tsui, an area popular with Chinese tourists.

Police said 56,000 turned out at the protest's peak.

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The march was billed as an opportunity to explain to Chinese in the territory what their protest movement is about.

Inside China, where news and information are heavily censored, the Hong Kong protests have been portrayed as a primarily violent, foreign-funded plot to destabilize the motherland, not a mass popular movement over Beijing's increased shadow over the semi-autonomous territory.

"We want to show tourists, including mainland China tourists, what is happening in Hong Kong and we hope they can take this concept back to China," Eddison Ng, an 18-year-old demonstrator, told reporters.

Hong Kongers speak Cantonese, but protesters were using Bluetooth to send leaflets in Mandarin — the predominant language in China — to nearby smartphones, hoping to spread the word by digital word of mouth.

"Why are there still so many people coming out to protest now?" one man said in Mandarin through a loudspeaker. "Because the Hong Kong government didn't listen to our demands."

Many protest banners were written with the simplified Chinese characters used in China, not the traditional characters used in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

A Hong Kong lawmaker coached crowds how to chant "Students are not rioters" using standard Mandarin pronunciation.

Protesters were demanding that the postponed extradition bill be scrapped entirely, an independent inquiry into police use of tear gas and rubber bullets, amnesty for those arrested, and for the unelected Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) to step down.

In an interview with the BBC yesterday, Chinese Ambassador to the UK Liu Xiaoming (劉曉明) said the extradition bill was needed to "plug loopholes" and that Beijing has "full confidence in

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the Hong Kong government.”

The protest began on the waterfront — the first time a rally has taken place off Hong Kong’s main island — and made its way to West Kowloon, a multibillion-dollar station that links to China’s high-speed rail network.

Police placed the glass-and-steel structure in virtual lockdown. Long lines of water-filled security barriers surrounded the station, while only those with previously purchased tickets were being allowed in.

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