

Hong Kong demonstrators gather in renewed rallies

Written by Taipei Times

Saturday, 07 September 2019 05:53 -



Protesters erect *Lady Liberty Hong Kong* — a statute depicting a schoolchild wearing a gas mask and carrying an umbrella — at a rally against “White Terror” at Chater Garden in Hong Kong yesterday.

Photo: Reuters

Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) yesterday said that measures announced this week to help restore order in the Chinese-ruled territory were a first step as thousands gathered outside a subway station in renewed protest after months of sometimes-violent unrest.

The crowds were expected to swell into the night, as the Asian financial hub braced for weekend demonstrations aiming to disrupt transport links to Hong Kong International Airport after Lam’s withdrawal of a controversial extradition bill failed to appease some activists.

The airport announced that only passengers with tickets would be allowed to use the Airport Express rail service today, boarding in downtown Hong Kong.

Trains would not stop on the Kowloon Peninsula, it said, adding that bus services could also be affected.

The measures are aimed at avoiding the chaos of last weekend, when protesters blocked airport approach roads, threw debris on the train track and trashed the Mass Transit Railway station in the nearby town of Tung Chung in running clashes with police.

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“The four actions are aimed at putting one step forward in helping Hong Kong to get out of the dilemma,” Lam told reporters during a trip to China’s southern region of Guangxi. “We can’t stop the violence immediately.”

Lam on Wednesday withdrew the controversial extradition bill that would have allowed people to be sent to China for trial in courts controlled by the Chinese Communist Party and announced three other measures to help ease the crisis, including initiating dialogue with the public.

Demonstrations, sometimes violent, have gripped the former British colony for three months, at times paralyzing parts of the territory amid running street battles between protesters and police, whose violence has drawn international attention.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday raised the issue of Hong Kong with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) in Beijing, saying that a peaceful solution was needed.

“I stressed that the rights and freedoms for [Hong Kong] citizens have to be granted,” Merkel said.

Li told a news conference with the German leader that “the Chinese government unswervingly safeguards ‘one country, two systems’ and ‘Hong Kong people govern Hong Kong people.’”

Hong Kong returned to China in 1997 under the “one country, two systems” formula, which guarantees freedoms not enjoyed in China, including an independent judiciary and the right to protests.

Many in Hong Kong fear that Beijing is eroding that autonomy.

China has denied accusations of meddling and has said that Hong Kong is its internal affair.

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It has denounced the protests, warning of the damage to the economy and the possible use of force to quell the unrest.

Beijing supported the territory's government "to end the violence and chaos in accordance with the law, to return to order, which is to safeguard Hong Kong's long-term prosperity and stability," Li said.

Many protesters have pledged to fight on, despite the withdrawal of the extradition bill, saying that the concession was too little, too late.

Activists and pro-democracy groups have said that they would not give up on their demands, with rallies planned yesterday evening at sites across the territory, such as subway stations and near government headquarters.

Hundreds gathered at the Prince Edward subway station, where police on Tuesday fired beanbag rounds and used pepper spray to clear demonstrators.

Apart from withdrawing the bill and releasing those arrested for violence, activists also want an independent inquiry into perceived police brutality, retraction of the word "riot" to describe rallies and the right for Hong Kong people to choose their own leaders.

The protests present Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) with his greatest popular challenge since he rose to power in 2012.

Authorities have also said that the turmoil has weighed on the economy, which faces its first recession in a decade.

There is evidence that some funds have been moved to rival financial centers, such as

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Singapore.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2019/09/07](#)