

Police shoot protester, man set on fire in Hong Kong

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A man is led away by police officers during a protest in the Central district of Hong Kong yesterday.

Photo: Bloomberg

A police officer yesterday shot a masked protester in an incident shown live on Facebook and a man was set on fire during one of the most violent days of clashes in Hong Kong since pro-democracy unrest erupted more than five months ago.

Protesters, who had already begun a territory-wide day of action aimed at paralyzing the international financial hub, reacted to the morning shooting by rampaging through train stations, barricading streets and vandalizing shops throughout the day.

A masked assailant also doused a man with a flammable liquid and set him ablaze during an argument, with the horrifying scene captured on mobile phones and posted online.

Police said a protester carried out that attack and accused black-clad “rioters” of an array of other violent acts, including throwing a gasoline bomb inside a train carriage.

“Continuing this rampage is a lose-lose situation for Hong Kong,” Hong Kong Police Force spokesman John Tse (譚志強) told a news conference in which he showed the video of the man being set alight, as well as a fire inside a train.

At the end of the business day Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) held a press conference to denounce the violence and vow it would not lead to any government

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concessions.

“I am making this statement clear and loud here, that will not happen,” Lam said.

The footage of the shooting — broadcast live on Facebook by a bystander — showed a police officer drawing a pistol as he tried to detain a masked person at a junction that had been blocked by protesters.

Another unarmed masked protester then approached the officer and was shot, quickly falling to the ground.

Authorities said that he was in critical condition in hospital.

Police chiefs defended the officer drawing his weapon and firing as a legitimate use of force given his fears for his safety.

However, protesters, who for months have accused police of using excessive force and demanded an independent inquiry into their actions, were incensed.

“I don’t understand why police have to use that kind of brutality to hurt innocent people... It’s just out of control,” said a 22-year-old information-technology employee, who gave her surname as Chan, as she joined angry crowds to protest in the area of the shooting.

Yesterday’s shooting was the third time protesters had been hit by live rounds fired by police.

None of the shootings have resulted in deaths.

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Lam said the man set on fire was in a critical condition.

She described that attack as “totally inhumane.”

Protesters ignored her pleas for calm, with further rallies in multiple locations across the territory last night.

Online forums used by the largely anonymous and leaderless movement also carried messages vowing another day of chaos today.

Hong Kong has endured 24 straight weeks of increasingly violent rallies aimed at securing greater democratic freedoms from China, which has ruled the territory under a “one country, two systems” framework since its handover from the UK in 1997.

The protesters are desperate to stop what they see as Beijing’s tightening control over Hong Kong, and reneging on its handover commitment to allow greater liberties for the territory than those on the mainland.

However, Beijing has refused to give in, and instead warned it is prepared to impose even greater security measures.

Tensions in Hong Kong were already high following the death on Friday of a 22-year-old student, who succumbed to injuries sustained from a fall in the vicinity of a police clearance operation a week earlier.

After a weekend of clashes and huge vigils, yesterday’s chaos began with small groups of masked protesters disrupting subway stations and roads during the rush hour commute.

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However, as footage of the shooting went viral, the protests snowballed.

During the lunchtime break in Central, a downtown district that hosts blue-chip international conglomerates and luxury retailers, police fired tear gas to disperse thousands of protesters, many dressed in office attire and chanting “murderers.”

Tear gas and rubber bullets were fired in multiple districts throughout the day, including at university campuses.

One video circulated by protesters on messaging channels showed a police officer trying repeatedly to drive his motorbike into protesters who had gathered on a road.

Police said the officer has since been suspended, the first time the force has made an announcement removing someone from active duty in relation to the protests since they began.

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