

US Senate passes HK democracy bill

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Medics help an injured protester leave the Hong Kong Polytechnic University campus in Hung Hom yesterday.

Photo: AFP

The US Senate, in a unanimous vote, on Tuesday passed legislation aimed at protecting human rights in Hong Kong amid a crackdown on a pro-democracy protest movement, drawing Beijing's ire.

Following the voice vote, the "Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act" must go to the US House of Representatives, which approved its own version last month.

The two chambers would have to work out their differences before any legislation could be sent to US President Donald Trump for his consideration.

"The people of Hong Kong see what's coming — they see the steady effort to erode the autonomy and their freedoms," US Senator Marco Rubio said at the start of the brief Senate debate, accusing Beijing of being behind the "violence and repression" in the territory.

The Senate passed a second bill, also unanimously, that would ban the export of certain crowd-control munitions to the Hong Kong Police Force.

Under the first bill, the US secretary of state would have to certify at least once a year that Hong Kong retains enough autonomy to qualify for special US trading consideration that bolsters its status as a world financial center.

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It also would provide for sanctions against officials responsible for human rights violations.

China yesterday condemned the passage of the first bill.

“This act neglects facts and truth, applies double standards and blatantly interferes in Hong Kong affairs and China’s other internal affairs,” Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Geng Shuang (耿爽) said in a statement. “It is in serious violation of international law and basic norms governing international relations. China condemns and firmly opposes it.”

In Hong Kong, dozens of protesters stood firm within the besieged Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hung Hom, where an “SOS” sign was laid out as supporters took up calls to distract police surrounding the campus by disrupting the territory’s transport.

The epicenter of nearly six months of pro-democracy protests has shifted to the campus, a stone’s throw from the territory’s harbor, where hardcore protesters have held off riot police with Molotov cocktails, bricks and arrows.

Protesters at the university said about 50 of their number remained after hundreds had fled deteriorating conditions and officials warned that police might fire live rounds.

Exhausted bands of young people continued to wander the debris-strewn campus, preparing Molotov cocktails while others slept on a gym floor.

The holdouts included about 20 of the university’s students, a school official said.

Others were medically evacuated overnight, and yesterday before dawn journalists watched as police chased down and arrested about a dozen students making a break for it.

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Meanwhile, Simon Cheng (陳國權), a former employee of the British consulate in Hong Kong, yesterday alleged he was tortured while being detained in China, during a 15-day ordeal in which he said he was branded “a British spy” and held in solitary confinement.

British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Dominic Raab has summoned the Chinese ambassador to Britain to demand an explanation.

Cheng, 29, a Hong Kong citizen, was detained for 15 days in August while trying to return to Hong Kong from a trip in mainland China.

He said he was tortured for days before being forced to falsely confess that he and the British government had played a role in the protests in Hong Kong.

He was put in what is known as “tiger chair,” a metal chair with bars that disables a detainee’s movements, and was hung handcuffed and shackled on a steep “x-cross” and forced into a spread-eagled position for hours.

“I have made clear we expect the Chinese authorities to investigate and hold those responsible to account,” Raab said.

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