

One million march in Hong Kong

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People take part in a pro-democracy march in Hong Kong yesterday.

Photo: AFP

More than 1 million people thronged Hong Kong's streets for a New Year's Day pro-democracy rally, organizers claimed, as protesters looked to carry their movement's momentum into this year.

"Based on the counting until 6:15pm and a comparison with the march on June 9, we believe the total turnout for today's march has surpassed the 1.03 million on June 9," the Civil Human Rights Front said in a statement, referring to last year's massive rally that kicked off the territory's pro-democracy campaign.

However, authorities forced organizers to end the rally earlier than planned after clashes between protesters and the police.

Hong Kong has been battered by nearly seven months of unrest, with frequent clashes between police and protesters as the territory battles its biggest political crisis in decades.

Despite a peaceful start yesterday, violence erupted near the march as it snaked through the Wan Chai district on Hong Kong Island. Riot police used pepper spray and tear gas, while protesters lobbed Molotov cocktails.

The front was ordered to end the rally soon after the clashes began.

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“The police have ... asked us to dismiss the rally,” the organizers told marchers using megaphones. “Please calmly and slowly leave the scene right now.”

In now-familiar scenes, riot police were seen taking positions at several locations, including the Mass Transit Railway’s Wan Chai Station.

Black-clad, masked protesters also gathered to set up makeshift barricades, while some businesses were vandalized in the afternoon.

The unrest in Hong Kong was sparked by a proposal to allow extraditions to mainland China, bringing millions out on to the streets in June last year. It has since morphed into a larger revolt against what many fear is Beijing’s tightening control.

China and the Hong Kong administration have refused to cede to the protesters’ demands, which include fully free elections in the territory, an inquiry into alleged police misconduct and amnesty for the nearly 6,500 people arrested during the movement — nearly one-third of them under the age of 20.

“It is sad that our demands from 2019 need to be carried forward to 2020,” the front’s Jimmy Sham (鄧天鵬) said at the start of the rally.

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