## Clashes break out as Hong Kong protesters escalate fight in suburbs

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***Protesters scuffle with policemen inside a shopping mall in Sha Tin District in Hong Kong. (AP Photo)***

**Hong Kong:** Tens of thousands rallied in a large Hong Kong suburb on Sunday, driven by abiding anger at the governmentâ€™s handling of an extradition bill that has revived fears of China tightening its grip over the former British colony and eroding its freedoms.

Clashes broke out as protesters hurled umbrellas and plastic bottles at police who retaliated by firing pepper spray amid chaotic scenes inside a shopping mall that houses some of the worldâ€™s biggest luxury brands.

Most of the demonstrators dispersed shortly afterward as a small group sang the Christian hymn â€œSing Hallelujah to the Lordâ€•, which has emerged as the unlikely anthem of the protests.

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Protesters marched in sweltering heat of about 32 degrees Celsius (89.6Â°F) in Sha Tin, a town between Hong Kong island and the border with China, extending the demonstrations outward from the heart of the financial centre into surrounding districts.

â€œThese days there is really no trust of China, and so the protesters come out,â€• said Jennie Kwan, 73.

â€œDidnâ€™t they promise 50 years, no change? And yet weâ€™ve all seen the changes. I myself am already 70-something years old. What do I know about politics? But politics comes to you.â€•

Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule in 1997 under a â€œone country, two systemsâ€• formula that guarantees its people freedoms for 50 years that are not enjoyed in mainland China, including the liberty to protest and an independent judiciary.

Beijing denies interfering in Hong Kong affairs, but many residents worry about what they see as an erosion of those freedoms and a relentless march toward mainland control.

Hong Kongâ€™s embattled leader, Carrie Lam, has said the extradition bill is â€œdeadâ€•, but opponents say they will settle for nothing short of its formal withdrawal.

Some protesters on Sunday waved banners appealing to US President Donald Trump to â€œPlease liberate Hong Kongâ€• and â€œDefend our Constitutionâ€•. Such scenes are certain to rile Beijing, which has been angered by criticism from Washington and London over the controversial bill.

Others waved British and American flags, while banners calling for Hong Kongâ€™s independence billowed in the sultry breeze from makeshift flagpoles.

One placard featured a picture of Chinese leader Xi Jinping with the words: â€œExtradite to China, disappear forever.â€•

***Riot policemen use shields to protect themselves from things thrown by protesters outside a shopping mall in Sha Tin District in Hong Kong. (AP Photo)***

Chants of â€œCarrie Lam go to hell!â€• rang through the crowd, gathered well away from the island heart of the financial centre which has witnessed the largest and most violent demonstrations over the past month.

Organisers said around 115,000 attended Sundayâ€™s rally. Police put the number at 28,000 at its peak.

Protesters span generations

Police chief Stephen Lo said 10 officers were injured and taken to hospital during clashes, including one who had a segment of his finger bitten off by a protester.

More than 40 people were arrested for charges including assaulting police and illegal assembly, he added.

The bill has stirred outrage across broad sections of Hong Kong society amid concerns it would threaten the much-cherished rule of law that underpins the cityâ€™s international financial status. Young, elderly and families joined the latest protest.

The protests have caused the former British colonyâ€™s biggest political crisis since its handover to China. Demonstrators stormed the Legislative Council building on July 1 and ransacked it.

â€œI never missed a march so far since June,â€• said a 69-year-old man who gave only his surname, Chen.

â€œI support the youngsters, they have done something we havenâ€™t done. There is nothing we can do to help them, but come out and march to show our appreciation and support.â€•

Protesters are also demanding that Lam step down, the withdrawal of the word â€œriotâ€• to describe demonstrations, the unconditional release of those arrested and an independent investigation into complaints of police brutality.

Police have condemned what they describe as â€œviolent protestersâ€• and stressed that officers will investigate all illegal acts.

One woman, in her mid-50s, said protesters had harassed her after she tried to defend the police, whom activists described as â€œdogsâ€•.

â€œItâ€™s verbal violence,â€• said the woman, who gave her name only as Catherine. â€œPeople just surrounded me and shouted rude language and that makes me feel I am living in fear.â€•

Mass protests over the bill since June have morphed into demonstrations over democracy and broader grievances in society.

On Saturday, a largely peaceful demonstration in a town close to the Chinese border turned violent as protesters hurled umbrellas and hardhats at police, who retaliated by swinging batons and firing pepper spray.

The government condemned violence during Saturdayâ€™s protests against so-called â€œparallel tradersâ€• from the mainland who buy goods in bulk in Hong Kong to carry into China for profit.

It said that during the last 18 months it had arrested 126 mainland visitors suspected of infringing the terms of their stay by engaging in parallel trading, and barred about 5,000 mainland Chinese also suspected of involvement.

Earlier on Sunday, hundreds of journalists joined a silent march to demand better treatment from police at protests.

A police statement said that while there was room for improvement in coordination between officers and the media, the police respected press freedom and the mediaâ€™s right to report.

- Reuters