

CHINA

Street Battles Break Out After Hong Kong Bans Masks at Protests

Leader Carrie Lam invokes colonial-era emergency law; subway operator shuts network citing destruction

By Natasha Khan and Joyu Wang

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HONG KONG—Street battles raged across Hong Kong and the city’s subway operator suspended its entire network late Friday as the government’s move to invoke emergency measures and ban people from wearing masks at protests triggered a backlash.

The city’s leader, Chief Executive Carrie Lam, invoked the British colonial-era law for the first time in 52 years, saying it was a deterrent to social unrest that posed a serious public danger. The ban on people wearing masks at public gatherings and unlawful assemblies would be punishable by as much as one year in prison.

After the law was announced, lawlessness returned in many districts around the city as clashes broke out between police and protesters. Demonstrators set fires outside subway entrances and vandalized Chinese banks, while police fired volleys of tear gas in several areas.

The city’s subway operator, MTR Corp. , in explaining the shutdown, cited destruction and arson in multiple stations and said some of its staff had been injured. A 14-year-old boy was shot in the leg by police in the northern district of Yuen Long, local media reported. Police later said an officer who was out of uniform and attacked by protesters fired a gunshot in self-defense in Yuen Long. A spokeswoman said she didn’t have any information on whether the shot hit anyone.

Many protesters wore masks at Friday’s protests, as they have done during the past four months to avoid being identified, with some also wanting to protect themselves from tear gas fired by riot police amid widespread and violent clashes. The movement is targeting the city’s government and police force as well as Beijing, which protesters say is exerting more influence in the semiautonomous Chinese city.

Just before midnight when the ban was to come into force, a High Court judge rejected an attempt by a pair of pro-democracy activists to delay its imposition, saying the government had



Protesters burn items at Causeway Bay station entrance in Hong Kong on Friday. PHOTO: NICOLAS ASFOURI/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

the right to impose such rules and citing the backdrop of violence and escalating disorder.

The full emergency law gives the government sweeping powers that include allowing authorities to impose curfews, censor media, and take control of ports and all transport, although the ban on masks was the only measure imposed Friday. Opponents said the use of emergency executive powers bypasses the legislature and could lead to greater restrictions on people's freedoms.

"What she's done is alarming and dangerous—she's pouring fuel on the fire," said Emily Lau, a former chairwoman of the Democratic Party. "Once you open up Pandora's box, where does it end?"

News of the mask ban spurred street demonstrations at lunchtime Friday, with crowds of protesters—most of them wearing masks—occupying a downtown road close to the government's headquarters as Mrs. Lam spoke to media inside. After the announcement, thousands more poured onto streets across the city, many dressed in office or ordinary clothing, chanting "Hong Kong people, resist!" Shops, gyms and malls began to close in anticipation of violence.

A march to oppose the mask law was called for Saturday afternoon. Activists handed out black face masks with the message: "October 4 will be a very polluted day. It is very suitable to wear masks."

"This entire movement started off because of a law Hong Kong people didn't agree with, and now Mrs. Lam is using an even harsher law to answer to those disagreements in society," said a civil servant surnamed Lam, who came from work and was marching along one of the city's main roads, carrying his briefcase.

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Photos of activists prepared to face off against tear gas and police scrutiny



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Mrs. Lam's government has been under increased pressure to contain the protests, which are hammering tourism and retail sales and sending Hong Kong's economy hurtling toward recession. The Hang Seng HK35 index, made up of stocks particularly exposed to the local economy, fell as much as 2.3% shortly after lunch, before recovering some ground to close around 1.4% lower.

The chief executive said that even though she was using emergency laws, Hong Kong wasn't in a state of emergency. She said she believed the new measure would create a deterrent effect against masked violent protesters and will assist police with law enforcement.

"We need to save Hong Kong's present and its future," said Mrs. Lam, flanked by members of her administration in front of a backdrop that said: Treasure Hong Kong, End Violence. "Making this decision was not an easy decision. But with the current situation, it was a necessary one," she said.

Under the law, those who wear masks at public gatherings with more than 50 people and marches with over 30 people face up to 12 months in jail

and a fine of more than \$3,000. As well, anyone who refuses to take off a mask at the request of



Protesters wearing face masks during a rally held to show opposition to an anti-mask law on Friday. PHOTO: FAZRY ISMAIL/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

police in a public area faces a fine of around \$1,300 and up to six months in jail. The regulation applies to masks made of any material—including paint—that cover a person’s face.

Exceptions would be made for people using masks for professional, religious or health reasons, according to the regulations.

The city’s beleaguered police force, along with pro-Beijing groups, had called for officials to use the law so they could better tackle protests after the city was rocked by the worst day of violence in more than 50 years during China’s National Day celebrations Tuesday.

“This may be the beginning of a draconian crackdown,” David Webb, an activist investor in Hong Kong, wrote on his website. The emergency regulations could be used again to legalize internment for long periods and block key parts of the internet, including social media and communication apps, he said.

The largely leaderless protest movement relies partly on social-media sites including Telegram and the Reddit-like local site LIHKG for organizing and coordinating strategy.

Mrs. Lam last month pledged to withdraw an unpopular extradition law that triggered mass street protests in early June. The move failed to quell unrest as protesters continued to pursue further demands, including a judge-led independent inquiry into alleged police brutality, pardons for those arrested at rallies and greater democratic freedoms.

Hong Kong’s education bureau, in a letter to all schools referring to the mask ban, said that students, whether they are inside or outside schools, shouldn’t wear masks or have their faces covered, except for religious or medical reasons.

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“There is absolutely no need for students to cover up their faces during daily activities and interactions with their

teachers and peers,” the bureau said, adding that “this principle also applies to all teachers and anyone who works at a school.”

Activists denounced Mrs. Lam’s move. The Civil Human Rights Front, an umbrella group that has organized some of the biggest marches and rallies this summer, said the government has skipped the legislature to bring in what it called a malevolent law, as it did with the proposed extradition bill.

The ban will aggravate tensions between society and political leaders, the group said, “further pushing Hong Kong into the abyss.”

—*Wenxin Fan contributed to this article.*

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