

CHINA

One Hong Kong District Becomes a Combat Zone

In the northern Sha Tin suburb, confrontations erupted as marchers built barricades and hurled projectiles at police, who responded with tear gas and rubber bullets



Police fire tear gas at protesters at Sha Tin on Tuesday. PHOTO: KIN CHEUNG/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By John Lyons and Chun Han Wong

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HONG KONG—They started streaming toward confrontation on a sunny Tuesday afternoon.

A parade of young and middle-class Hong Kongers, dressed in black, couples walking hand in hand, moved along a placid river in what looked more like a procession for peace than a march toward battles where some would pick up Molotov cocktails and bricks and hurl them at police.

Yet by midafternoon, the northern suburban district of Sha Tin had become a combat zone, one that brought into sharp relief the conflict between a city seething against what protesters see as increasingly violent police tactics and the isolated and outnumbered officers tasked with maintaining order.

A police communique the night before struck an ominous note about the mood among officers. It said investigators believed some violent, hard-core protesters were plotting to kill police,

perhaps by using disguises to get in close. Protesters haven't been known to ever use such tactics, but the statement was a signal the police would be on edge.



Protesters face off with police in Sha Tin on Tuesday. PHOTO: ISAAC LAWRENCE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

On the other side of the territory, a police officer under attack shot an 18-year-old protester in the chest. Police said they fired real bullets six times on Tuesday. In recent weeks, officers have fired warning shots when outnumbered or under attack.

The march in Sha Tin, the city's biggest residential district, started from an iconic temple dedicated to an ancient Chinese general and pulled in several thousand people by the time it reached the interconnected residential towers and shopping malls at its urban center.

Protesters dug up bricks to use as projectiles, erected triangular barriers from roadway fences and debated strategy. One young man suggested building defensive lines in front of a shopping mall.

"Does anyone have any better ideas?" he yelled. After a vote, some in the group decided to build a perimeter and prepare for a fight.

Hundreds of protesters also took over the above-ground maze of balconies and overpasses, gaining a height advantage. They dragged bricks to the scene in public garbage bins and lined them up alongside full cans of Coke and beer on the parapet. Asked if he planned to throw the cans at the police, one protester responded with a grin, "Maybe." Behind him, a group partly shielded from view prepared dozens of Molotov cocktails.

A group of police officers in riot gear arrived to loud jeers of "Black police, may your entire families die," and "Five demands, not one less," a reference to protesters' call for government concessions including an independent inquiry into police violence.

The officers, numbering about a hundred, lined up across an intersection. Full cans rained down in their direction. Some protesters hurled bricks and Molotov cocktails.

In response, police fired volleys of tear gas and less-lethal ammunition like rubber projectiles at protesters on the upper floors. The pop of shots fired at times became a staccato.

Some tear-gas shells landed near residential apartments, prompting a group of middle-aged men and women watching from the sidelines to hurl abuse.

“You guys are crazy!” one man shouted at the police. A woman chimed in: “There are a lot of people living up there!”

Before dusk, another group of protesters advanced toward the scene across a nearby bridge, blocked only by a group of around 40 police officers left to guard it.

A commander on the bridge directed his team’s shooting, alternating between tear gas and rubber rounds. Calling forward a pair of officers, he ordered: “Fire!” Two dull pops rang out, and streams of white smoke streaked toward the advancing crowd.

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For a few tense minutes, it appeared the protesters, advancing under the cover of umbrellas and traffic barriers, would overrun the small force. Then reinforcements arrived. A large number of elite riot-police officers clad in dark blue ran to the scene and led a baton charge across the bridge. The protesters swiftly retreated, regrouping about a block away.

Police halted at the end of the bridge and took stock. A commander of the team of reinforcements stood on a culvert and shouted to his squad in English: “The blue team came, and they ran away.” He did a little dance.

As daylight waned, police regrouped to clear the crowds in the town center.

Officers fired repeated volleys of tear gas and rubber projectiles as they charged at protesters occupying streets between residential high-rises, prompting many to flee in a hectic rush. One squad of officers dashed toward the upper-floor walkways. Sounds of firing, shattering glass and antipolice invective rang out.

They left empty streets behind them. Strips of paper money, labeled “hell banknote” and typically burned at funerals, lay strewn across the roads along with metal fencing, bricks, broken

umbrellas and spent tear-gas shells. A dropped cellphone started ringing, the music echoing down the deserted street.

The sun started to set, and a helicopter whirred overhead.

Moments later, a series of dull pops echoed through the neighborhood. Tear gas wafted through the air. Another street battle had begun.

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Corrections & Amplifications

Hong Kong police said they fired real bullets six times during protests on Tuesday, but none in the Sha Tin district. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated they fired two bullets in Sha Tin. (10/1/19)

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