
Hong Kong Police Start Clearing Main Protest Camp

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Watched by police, workers in white helmets used box cutters and pliers to remove plastic ties from the barricades, which were made up of metal and plastic safety barriers topped with traffic cones and scaffolding poles. They then passed parts of the barricades to co-workers who quickly shuffled them away to the side of the road.

The protesters reject Beijing's restrictions on the first election for the city's top leader, scheduled for 2017, but have failed to win any concessions from Hong Kong's government, and the movement's momentum has faded recently as the government stuck to its apparent strategy of waiting the protesters out.

Politics student Max Leung, 22, said he felt sad to see the barricades removed and would stay until police cleared the area. He said he was willing to be arrested but would not resist officers.

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"We redefined the public space," Leung said at his tent set up within the zone. "It was supposed to be just cars and now we occupy it, we have a study area for students in the middle of the highway, people here they care about each other."

The workers were carrying out a court restraining order calling for barriers to be dismantled and obstructions removed from three sections of the protest site. Police then plan to move in to clear other blocked sections of road so that traffic can start flowing again.

The operation will be under close scrutiny with a group of about 30 academics monitoring the operation, along with the Independent Police Complaints Council and human rights groups.

The sprawling encampment in Hong Kong's Admiralty section, on the edge of the financial district, has been the focal point for the protesters, who have occupied the site for 75 days. As the clear out neared, protesters chanted "I want universal suffrage" and threw pieces of paper that read "We will be back."

On September 28 police fired dozens of tear gas rounds at thousands of protesters gathering in the area angry over the prolonged detention of a student leader. The move infuriated protesters and the wider public and kick-started the student-led protest movement, which came to include two other protest sites in Hong Kong.

Over the past 2 and a half months, police say 655 people have been arrested, and 129 officers injured. They have given no overall injury toll.

A separate court order led to the clearing of the Mong Kok protest site in late November. The operation and ensuing nighttime clashes in the gritty neighborhood's surrounding streets resulted in about 160 arrests.

On the eve of the action to clear the Admiralty area, thousands of protesters and supporters streamed into the site for a last night of what's come to be known as the "Umbrella Movement," named for the pro-democracy protesters' preferred method of deflecting police pepper spray.

Two student groups that played key roles in organizing the protests had called for supporters to stay until the last moment, but not to resist authorities.

"If the government wants to use police to clear the site, don't forget, the clearance can't resolve political conflicts, it can't resolve society's dilemma," said Joshua Wong, the 18-year-old head of the Scholarism group and the pro-democracy movement's most prominent leader.

The sprawling encampment in Hong Kong's Admiralty neighborhood, on the edge of the financial district, has become the symbolic nucleus of the protest movement.
