

## International

# Hand signals and shields: How HK's parliament was stormed

## Hong Kong's protesters besieged the city's parliament

**HONG KONG:** With makeshift shields zip-tied to their wrists, a trolley converted into a battering ram and rehearsed hand signals, Hong Kong's protesters showed remarkable levels of do-it-yourself savvy as they besieged the city's parliament. Throughout the last three weeks of unprecedented anti-government demonstrations, the largely young students at the frontlines of the protests have displayed a flair for innovation in their battle with the authorities.

But Monday's storming and vandalising of the legislature was their most brazen operation to date - an hours-long siege and eventual breach of a heavily fortified building using whatever tools came to hand. The protests have been leaderless - unlike previous mass demonstrations where key figures have been jailed in recent years for leading or encouraging civil disobedience. Many of the current generation of largely young protesters proudly repeat the phrase "be like water", a philosophy of adaptability and unpredictability espoused by martial arts master and local legend Bruce Lee.

### Hand signals

In an inventive move that proved key in supporting those on the front lines, protesters created a string of hand signals to communicate equipment requests. A guide to the signals was shared among social media - a triangle an appeal for more helmets. Other gestures alert the crowds for cling film, umbrellas,

scissors, even asthma medication.

The equipment is then ferried to the front by long, snaking lines of protesters. Yesterday police announced that a 35-year-old man named Lau had been arrested during the early hours of Monday morning after they found supplies in his van. "Officers seized a batch of scissors, cutters, hexagon keys, helmets, masks, gloves and industrial grade baking soda from a parked van," the police said.

### 'We have to support each other'

The South China Morning Post reported that the decision to storm the parliament was taken after some 200 hardcore protesters put various options to a vote earlier on Monday, as the city was marking the anniversary of its handover to China.

Tosi Kwan, a 29-year-old teacher, was among those helping to ferry equipment to the front before the parliament was breached. "I'm not too sure about the ultimate goal tonight," he told AFP. "Maybe those on the front lines have discussed this, I don't know. But as resistors, we have to support each other, and those on the front lines." While Kwan was not taking part in the break-in, he said he understood those who were because years of peaceful protests had failed to achieve political reform.

"Such resistance is necessary. It's been clear: two million people marching was useless," he said, referencing a record-breaking

rally on 16 June. The first successful breach of the building's heavily reinforced windows came after protesters filled a street vendor's trolley with heavy debris and then used it as a battering ram. It looked like something out of a medieval siege. Inside the building stood rows and rows of riot police with shields, pepper spray and gas masks.

On the other side protesters slammed the trolley against the glass for some two hours as others protected them from police pepper spray with a shield wall of umbrellas. Some of the protesters had strapped makeshift armour to their bodies, comprised of thick magazines or cork padding. One of the most persistent assailants wielded an eye-catching orange shield that was made out of one half of a plastic suitcase. Others assembled long paint rollers to cover CCTV cameras on the ceiling.

### 'Don't destroy'

But it was steel poles, taken from nearby construction sites and unscrewed from street fencing, that proved the most reliable at defeating the toughened glass. As the sun set, protesters discovered they could make much better progress against the glass by attacking its edges, creating a hole that could quickly be widened. The riot police then retreated behind steel shutters that placed the building on complete lockdown. But they were little match for the protesters who again used the polls to prise the shutters up high enough to place



**HONG KONG:** The Main Chamber is seen during a media tour of the Legislative Council in Hong Kong yesterday, two days after protesters broke into the complex. — AFP

metal barricades underneath and allow people to flood through.

At that point police abandoned the parliament to the protesters who swarmed the building, spraying the walls with graffiti, tearing down portraits of city leaders and hanging a colonial-era flag in the debating chamber. But even the storming showed careful levels of

coordination with notes left by protesters telling their fellow assailants to leave books and display cabinets with expensive trinkets unharmed. "Preserve cultural objects", "Don't destroy", read two notes next to a display cabinet. Another sign was stuck to a fridge containing drinks. "We are not thieves," it read. "We won't take without asking." — AFP

## Nine Bangladesh's opposition members sentenced to death

**DHAKA:** A court in Bangladesh yesterday sentenced to death nine opposition activists over an attack on a train carrying current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina 25 years ago, a prosecutor said. A further 25 activists from the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) were jailed for life and 13 other members jailed for 10 years by the court in Pabna, prosecutor Akhtaruzzaman Mukta told AFP.

"Thirty-four of the convicts were present when the judge delivered the verdict. Others have been fugitive for years," Mukta said. The BNP, whose leader Khaleda Zia was jailed last year for corruption in a case that her supporters say is politically motivated, said the new verdicts were aimed at crippling the party. "It is a fabricated case and the verdict is a farce," BNP spokesman Rizvi Ahmed told AFP, adding the judgement was "stage-managed" by the government to inject fear among the opposition.

The prosecutor said BNP activists shot at a train carrying the then opposition leader Hasina and attacked it with molotov cocktails in September 1994 when it reached Iswardi Rail Station where Hasina was scheduled to



**DHAKA:** This picture shows a general view of the city of Dhaka under the rain. The monsoon rains sweep across the subcontinent from June to September. — AFP

address a rally. At least half a dozen people including a minister now in Hasina's current cabinet were injured, prompting police to open fire to bring the situation under control, he said. Hasina returned to power in 2009 and has since led the country for more than a decade. In December she won a third consecutive term in a vote observers said was flawed. Hasina insists she won fairly. In recent years

the prime minister has been accused of increasing authoritarianism and overseeing a crackdown on the opposition and dissent, with tens of thousands of BNP officials and activists and their allies detained by police. Scores of opposition activists have also gone missing - feared abducted by security forces - and top journalists have been detained for criticising the government. — AFP



**KASHMIR:** An Indian police vehicle patrols in Srinagar. — AFP

## Modest rise in Indian military spending likely, modernisation on hold

**MUMBAI:** India is likely to stick to a modest rise in defence spending in the 2019/2020 budget due on Friday because of tight government finances, officials said, further delaying a long-planned military modernisation programme. India's air force desperately needs hundreds of combat planes and helicopters to replace its Soviet-era aircraft while the navy has long planned for a dozen submarines to counter the expanding presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean.

The army, a large part of which is deployed on the border with traditional foe Pakistan, has been seeking everything from assault rifles to surveillance drones and body armour. But these plans have been on hold for years because governments have not been able to set aside large sums and most of the defence expenditure goes on salaries and pensions for a 1.4 million standing military, the world's second largest after China.

In an interim budget announced in February before national elections, the government allocated 4.31 trillion rupees (\$62.27 billion) for defence, a 6.6 percent rise over the previous year, raising concern at the time it wouldn't be enough for modernisation. But a finance ministry official told Reuters there was unlikely to be any change to that allocation when Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presents the federal budget in parliament. "Defence is our major spending and we give it as much as the budget allows. But this year, a significant rise to what has already been allotted looks difficult," the official involved in the budget preparations said.

China, by contrast, in March announced defence spending of around \$180 billion, a 7.5% increase over 2018 and faster than the economic growth target. While China doesn't give much break-up, it is largely assumed that a substantial portion of it goes towards modernisation, helped also by a cutback in maintenance costs. Since Chinese President Xi Jinping took office in late 2012, he has made strengthening and modernising the military a very key part of his policy platform. Part of that has been reduction in troops by about 300,000 and the money saved in this is invested in much more advanced equipment and research and development.

### Bloated military

Indian military planners have also considered restructuring the forces for the last couple of years to reduce manpower costs, but have not moved fast enough. There are 2.4 million defence pensioners at the moment, with approximately 55,000 being added every year.

"We need a lot of funds but it is not very likely to come," a defence ministry official said. Laxman Behera, a research fellow at the government-funded Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi, said the military's spending on pay, allowances and pensions had risen from 45% to 56% in the last four years. Share of capital procurement had come down to 18% from 21% during the same period. "Pensions take away a major chunk of India's defence expenditure every year," he said.

The Modi government has also tied military modernisation to its Make-in-India drive to build a domestic industry which has been slow in taking off. Global defence companies such as Lockheed Martin and Boeing are bidding for a contract to supply the air force 114 combat planes which will be made in India in a deal estimated to be over \$15 billion. There will be little movement on the jet contract and another on submarines if no new funds are announced, the defence ministry official said. — Reuters

## In blow to Singapore's expansion, Malaysia bans sea sand exports

**SINGAPORE:** Malaysia, Singapore's biggest source for sea sand, has banned the export of the commodity, according to officials in Kuala Lumpur, a move that traders said could complicate the island-state's ambitious expansion plans on reclaimed land. Those plans include the development of the Tuas mega port, slated to be the world's biggest container terminal. Singapore has increased its land area by a quarter since independence in 1965, mostly by using sand to reclaim coastal areas.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir, who came to power in a shock election last year, imposed a ban on all sea sand exports on October 3, two senior government sources with direct knowledge of the decision said. The government sources, asking not to be named due to the sensitivity of the matter, said Mahathir was upset that Malaysia's land was being used to increase the size of its wealthier neighbour. He was also concerned corrupt Malaysian officials were benefiting from the secretive business.

Endie Shazlie Akbar, Mahathir's press secretary, confirmed that the government had put a stop to sand exports last year. However, he denied that it was aimed at curbing Singapore's expansion plans, saying it was a move to clamp down on illegal sand smuggling. The ban was never made public because of the potential diplomatic fallout, the sources said. Singapore has not made any public comment on the ban. Singapore and Malaysia were part of British-ruled Malaya and became distinct countries in 1965. They often have strained relations due to disputes over territory and shared resources, such as water.

Singapore's Ministry of National Development, which oversees sand imports, did not directly respond to questions about a ban by Malaysia but said it had multiple sources of sand and was cutting back its use of the commodity. "Sand is imported on a commercial basis from various countries to ensure resilience in our sand supply," the ministry said in response to questions from Reuters.

"The government has also been encouraging the industry to reduce the reliance on sand." Two traders importing sand to Singapore, who both asked not to be named, said the commodity is becoming scarcer and driving Singapore to source sand from as far as India, which would push up costs. Shipping is the biggest single cost in acquiring sand. The traders added Singapore has been stockpiling sand in recent years which could provide a buffer against any immediate bottleneck in supplies. The sand industry is opaque with no international price index, making it difficult to gauge the financial impact of a ban by Malaysia. Sea sand is mostly used for land reclamation, while river sand is a core component in construction materials like cement. Singapore imported 59 million tonnes of sand from Malaysia in 2018, at a cost of \$347 million, according to United Nations Comtrade data, which is based on information provided by individual countries' customs offices. — Reuters

### News in brief

#### Professor doused in kerosene

**CHITTAGONG:** Teachers demonstrated in Bangladesh's Chittagong port city yesterday after a student doused a top professor with kerosene to protest against his allegedly lewd lectures, police and officials said. Masud Mahmud, a professor of English literature at private University of Science and Technology, escaped unhurt Tuesday after other students and police came to his rescue. Local police chief Pranab Kumar Chowdhury said a student had been arrested and remanded in custody. The Bengali daily Prothom Alo said the professor was chased by around half a dozen students before two of them shoved him, and another doused him with kerosene. — AFP

#### India accused of killing 5

**MUZAFFARABAD:** The Pakistani military accused India yesterday of killing five soldiers along the de facto border in Kashmir, just months after the nuclear-armed neighbours nearly went to war over the disputed Himalayan region. The soldiers were killed in a blast in Barnala, on the Pakistan-administered side of Kashmir, just a few meters from the so-called "Line of Control" that divides the region, the military said in a statement. It was not immediately clear when the blast happened. "The incident is evident of state sponsored terrorism by India violating bilateral ceasefire agreement and the international rules," the statement said, though it also added that the nature of the blast is still being investigated. — AFP

#### 6 killed in factory blaze

**DHAKA:** Fire tore through a textile factory in central Bangladesh killing at least six people, officials said yesterday. The fire brigade took 12 hours to control the blaze at the huge factory in Sreepur, near the capital Dhaka, which cast fresh attention on safety in Bangladeshi factories after a series of disasters. The fire spread quickly late Tuesday as water supplies to the fire hydrant ran out, local fire chief Akhter uz Zaman said. The fire brigade said six bodies had been recovered. With about half of the complex destroyed, emergency services were searching for other victims, Zaman added. Authorities have launched an inquiry into the cause of the blaze. Bangladesh, the world's second largest clothes maker after China, has faced international criticism over lax factory safety standards. — AFP

#### 8 dead, 15 missing in India

**MUMBAI:** Eight people were killed and at least 15 were missing yesterday after the heaviest monsoon rains in a decade breached a dam in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, authorities said. In the state capital Mumbai, the death toll from a wall collapse in a slum on Tuesday following the torrential downpour reached 24, with more rain expected in coming days. Heavy rain continued to lash the coastal city of 20 million people yesterday, bringing it to a virtual standstill as flooding cut train lines, closed the airport's main runway and caused traffic misery. Building collapses and dam breaches are common during the monsoon in India due to dilapidated structures that buckle under the weight of continuous rain. — AFP

#### 8 arrested over cyberattacks

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong police said yesterday they have arrested eight people for stealing and disclosing personal information of officers online, as the city grapples with the aftermath of unprecedented anti-government protests that saw its parliament ransacked. The semi-autonomous city has been plunged into crisis by massive demonstrations since last month against its Beijing-backed government, sparked by a law that would have allowed extraditions to the mainland. The anger spilled over on Monday as groups of mostly young, hardline protesters stormed Hong Kong's Legislative Council, spraying graffiti on the walls of its main chamber and defacing the city's seal before police regained control of the building. — AFP