

## International

# Hong Kong political crisis builds after huge protest against extradition law

## Broad business, legal and social concern over bill

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong was plunged into a fresh political crisis yesterday night after several hundred thousand people took to the streets to thwart a proposed extradition law that would allow suspects to be sent to mainland China to face trial. Organizers said their initial estimates put the turnout at well over half a million people, saying it outstripped a demonstration in 2003 when 500,000 hit the streets to challenge government plans for tighter national security laws.

Those laws were later shelved and a key government official forced to resign. Yesterday's outpouring was already raising the pressure on the administration of Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam and her official backers in Beijing. "She has to withdraw the bill and resign," veteran Democratic Party lawmaker James To told crowds gathering outside the city's parliament and government headquarters yesterday night. "The whole of Hong Kong is against her."

After To spoke, thousands were still arriving, having started the march five hours earlier, filling four lanes of a major thoroughfare. Some sat in a nearby park singing "hallelujah", but on a nearby road tensions were building after hours of peaceful protest. Riot police armed with batons and helmets were gathering while government-funded broadcaster RTHK reported that they used pepper spray

on six masked men trying to block the road.

Lam had yet to comment on the rally. The demonstration capped weeks of growing outrage in the business, diplomatic and legal communities, which fear corrosion of Hong Kong's legal autonomy and the difficulty of ensuring basic judicial protections in mainland China. US and European officials have issued formal warnings - concern matched by international business and human rights lobbies that fear the changes would dent Hong Kong's rule of law.

The former British colony was handed back to Chinese rule in 1997 amid guarantees of autonomy and various freedoms including a separate legal system, which many diplomats and business leaders believe is the city's strongest remaining asset.

The unusually broad opposition to the rendition bill displayed yesterday came amid a series of government moves to deepen links between southern mainland China and Hong Kong. Police had yet to issue their own estimate of the protest size. But as tens of thousands reached the Legislative Council in the Admiralty business district, the starting point in Victoria Park was crowded with thousands more still waiting to join the march.

Some carried yellow umbrellas - a symbol of the pro-democracy Occupy protests that choked key city streets for 79 days in 2014.

Streets were packed along the route; Reuters witnesses at various key points estimated the crowd at several hundred thousand. Chants of "no China extradition, no evil law" echoed through the highrise city streets, while other marchers called for Lam and other senior officials to step down.

### Good-natured protest

One protester held a sign reading "Carry off Carrie", while another declared "Extradite yourself, Carrie". Another sign said "let's make Hong Kong great again", with a photo depicting U.S. President Donald Trump firing Lam. The genial crowd included young families pushing babies in prams as well as the elderly braving 32 degree C (90°F) heat, some spraying each other with water misters. Debates will start in the council on Wednesday on the amendments to the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance. The bill could be passed into law by the end of June.

Lam has tweaked the amendments but refused to pull the bill, saying it is vital to plug a long-standing "loophole". She has also said speedy action is needed to ensure a Hong Kong man suspected of murdering his girlfriend can be sent to Taiwan for trial. Opposition to the bill has united a broad range of the community, from usually pro-establishment business people and lawyers to students,



**HONG KONG:** Protesters gesture as they chant 'no extradition' as they rally against a controversial extradition law proposal in Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

pro-democracy figures and religious groups. Insurance agents, executives and small entrepreneurs joined bus drivers and mechanics in the streets yesterday. Dozens of people told Reuters it was their first protest march, with some remarking on the strong sense of unity among the diverse crowds. "I come here to fight," said a wheelchair-bound, 78-year-old

man surnamed Lai, who was among the first to arrive. Schoolteacher Garry Chiu joined the protest with his wife and 1-year-old daughter, saying, "It is no longer about me." "I need to save my daughter. If the law is implemented anyone can disappear from Hong Kong. No one will get justice in China. We know there are no human rights." — Reuters

## From Baikonur to Borat: Things to know about Kazakhstan

**ALMATY:** Kazakhs went to the polls yesterday to elect a new president, though long-term former leader Nursultan Nazarbayev is likely to pull the strings from behind the scenes for many years to come. Here are five things to know about the ex-Soviet Central Asian nation:

### Space

Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world with an area of more than 2.7 million square kilometers. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 it has also been the world's largest country to lack access to a sea. The vast Kazakh Steppe is home to the Baikonur cosmodrome - the world's most famous launch pad nearly 60 years after Yuri Gagarin blasted off from there to become the first man in space. The Russia-controlled cosmodrome has had a monopoly on travel to the International Space Station ever since NASA stopped its launches to the facility.

### Chilly steppe capital

Former president Nazarbayev, 78, was

until March the only leader Kazakhstan had known since independence. He described the transformation of a provincial steppe town into the new capital Astana during the 1990s as one of the top achievements of his three-decade reign. The country's capital was previously Almaty. The city was renamed Nur-Sultan in Nazarbayev's honor after he stepped down as president in March. It is known for its futuristic skyline of skyscrapers and chilly winter temperatures that regularly plunge below -20 degrees Celsius. An observation tower in the centre of the city of a million inhabitants is topped with a viewing platform where visitors can place their hands on a gold imprint of Nazarbayev's palm.

### Contested history with Russia

Kazakhstan is proud of its nomadic history and marked 550 years since the birth of the first Kazakh state in colorful fashion in 2015. The celebrations followed controversial remarks by Russian leader Vladimir Putin, who said that Kazakhs had never had statehood prior to their country's independence from Moscow. While Kazakhstan and Russia traditionally enjoy strong relations, their shared history sometimes gets in the way. Earlier this year the Russian foreign ministry criticized a Kazakh film-maker's documentary which argued the famine in Kazakhstan during Soviet forced collectivization constituted a genocide.

### Hit by oil prices

Kazakhstan is Central Asia's biggest



**NUR-SULTAN:** People vote in Kazakhstan's presidential elections in Nur-Sultan yesterday. — AFP

economy which has in the past seen double-digit growth, but has struggled to recover from a 2014 plunge in oil prices. It has also been affected by the economic crisis in Russia, which led to a devaluation of the Kazakh currency, the tenge, and to high inflation. Oil accounts for around a quarter of the country's Gross Domestic Product and most of its budget revenues. The world's biggest producer of uranium, Kazakhstan is also overflowing with manganese, iron, chromium and coal. Kazakhstan has linked the future of its economy to neighbouring China, investing heavily in its road network, railways and port infrastructure to facilitate trade links.

### Getting past Borat

For all the petrodollars the resource-rich state has invested in image promotion, many beyond its borders continue to associate the country with British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's 2006 smash hit mockumentary Borat. Baron Cohen's sleazy character has faded from Kazakhstan-related headlines over a decade since the film's release. But he reared his head again in 2017 when Baron Cohen offered to pay fines for Czech tourists detained by Kazakh police after they posed for photos in the capital wearing Borat-style 'mankinis'. — AFP

## Nepal authorities face mountainous challenge identifying dead bodies

**KATHMANDU:** The bodies of four climbers who failed their Everest challenge and left little clue as to their identities have thrown up a new challenge for Nepalese authorities who control the world's tallest peak. Worn by the wind and cold to near skeletons, the remains have been in a Kathmandu morgue since they were brought back from the slopes two weeks ago with nearly 11 tons of trash. Police and government officials admit they face a huge challenge putting names to the dead climbers and sending them back to their home countries. They cannot even be sure how long the corpses had been among scores waiting to be found on the slopes.

A government-organized clean-up team retrieved the bodies between the Everest base camp and the South Col at 7,906 meters (25,938 feet) this climbing season. "The bodies are not in a recognizable state, almost down to their bones. There is no face to identify them," senior police official Phanindra Prasai said. "We have directed the hospital to collect DNA samples so they can be matched with any families who come forward."

### Everest afterlife

Nepalese police are going through administrative processes so they can make an appeal for help and inform foreign diplomatic missions about the bodies. But some fear the mystery could take years to solve. "It is a difficult task," said Ang Tsering Sherpa, former president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association. "They need to share more information about the bodies, especially the locations of where the bodies were found, and reach out to expedition operators." More than 300 people have died on the 8,848-metre high mountain since expeditions to reach the top started in the 1920s. It is not known how many bodies are still hidden in the ice, snow and deep crevasses. The body of George Mallory, the British climber who went missing during a 1924 attempt on the summit, was only found in 1999. The remains of his partner Andrew Irvine have never been found. And it is still not known if they reached the top.

Some bodies, still in colorful climbing gear, have become landmarks on the way up to the summit, earning nicknames such as "Green Boots" and "Sleeping Beauty". "Green Boots" is believed to be an Indian climber who died during a 1996 expedition. The body was believed to have been moved away from the main path in 2014. "Sleeping Beauty" is said to be Francys Arsentiev, who was the first American woman to reach the summit without bottled oxygen in 1998, but who died on the way down. — AFP

## Syrian rebel town buries goalie who became 'singer of the revolution'

**AL-DANA:** Thousands of people flocked to the funeral yesterday of a Syrian soccer star turned fighter who became an icon of the revolt against President Bashar Al-Assad. Abdelbasset Al-Sarout, 27, died on Saturday from wounds he sustained in northwest Syria, where an army offensive has pounded the last major rebel bastion for weeks. Once a well-known goalkeeper from the city of Homs, Sarout gained a new kind of fame when the popular uprising against Assad's rule erupted in 2011.

He was dubbed the "singer of the revolution" for chanting ballads at rallies that eulogized slain activists and vilified the president. After Assad's iron-fisted crackdown on the protests, Sarout took up arms and became a wanted man. His path mirrored the uprising's spiral into an armed fight to the death between Damascus and the myriad militias and guerrilla bands that the conflict spawned.

Sarout was moved from a hospital in Turkey, which backs the opposition, across the border on Sunday, with a convoy of cars and motorcycles following the coffin into Syria. People chanted, honked and waved rebel flags on the way to the funeral in the border town of al-Dana, where one of Sarout's brothers is buried. Four of Sarout's brothers and his father had already died fighting pro-government forces.

Crowds stood on the roofs to watch Sarout's body, wrapped in white, being carried through the town. Rebels from his faction, Jaish Al-Izza, fired into the air. In the mosque, men including fighters in combat uniform knelt in front of his body to pray, some of them weeping. "We all know Sarout's songs and golden vocals. Today is a big loss, a sad day for the Syrian revolution. We lost one of its icons," said Ali Al-Zajel, an activist at the funeral. With Russian and Iranian help, Assad's military has reclaimed much of Syria by crushing opposition enclaves in recent years.

Sarout was among hundreds of thousands of civilians and insurgents shuttled to the northwest under surrender deals as the army reconquered their hometowns. Sarout, who fought government forces in his home city, left under such a deal in 2014 after a bitter two-year siege. As rebel factions struggled with infighting and the growing influence of Muslim jihadists, Sarout was accused of switching his allegiance to Islamic State, which he denied in a video in 2015. — Reuters



**BAB AL-HAWA:** Fellow Syrian rebel fighters carry the coffin of late rebel fighter Abdel-Basset Al-Sarout yesterday at the Bab Al-Hawa crossing point, northwestern Syria, on the way to his funeral after crossing the border from Turkey. — AFP



**CHITTAGONG:** Bangladeshi fishermen block a highway as they protest against a two-month long fishing ban on the Bay of Bengal in Chittagong yesterday. — AFP

## Bangladesh highway blocked as fishermen protest catch ban

**CHITTAGONG:** Several thousand fishermen blocked Bangladesh's busiest highway yesterday, police said, as protests escalated over a two-month fishing ban in the Bay of Bengal. The fishermen say the 65-day blockade - intended to replenish fish stocks - is driving them out of business. Their one-hour protest at the coastal town of Sitakunda caused several kilometers of tailbacks on the main road linking the capital, Dhaka, to the second city of Chittagong. Local police chief Suman Banik said the demonstration by 3,000 fishermen and their families was peaceful "but it caused a huge traffic jam on this busy highway".

The demonstrators only cleared the road after a government administrator and a local member of parliament promised to help. The fishing ban runs from May 20 to July

23 and navy and coast guard vessels are patrolling the zone to prevent breaches. Bangladesh frequently bans deep sea fishing and catches in coastal rivers to help stocks, but this is the longest imposed for seas near the coast and fishing communities are furious.

About 15 million people in the region directly or indirectly depend on Bangladesh's multi-billion dollar fishing industry. Shyamol Palit, an organizer of the demonstration, said the ban has hit poor fishermen hard, especially the Hindu Joldas community. More than 55,000 Joldas families live in the Chittagong region and are employed in coastal fishing mainly running their own small boats. "The Joldas have taken loans to sail boats this season. This sudden and long embargo has put them in a debt trap," he said.

The government has announced it will provide free rice for nearly half a million families of badly-affected fishermen. But Palit said the scheme is not wide enough and "you cannot run a family only with a sack of rice." The ban has also hit the nearly one million Rohingya refugees who live in camps in Bangladesh after fleeing violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state in recent years. The refugees are not officially allowed to work outside the camps, but thousands are secretly employed on trawlers owned by Bangladeshis. — AFP