

## International

# Hong Kong leader apologizes; protesters urge her to resign

## Beijing backs embattled Hong Kong leader

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam apologized yesterday as hundreds of thousands of black-clad protesters maintained calls for her to resign over her handling of a bill that would have allowed people to be sent to mainland China for trial. The chief executive issued the rare apology one day after she indefinitely delayed the extradition bill, which sparked one of the most violent protests in the city in decades.

A government spokesman said that poor government work over the bill had led to "substantial controversies and disputes in society, causing disappointment and grief." Lam "apologized to the people of Hong Kong for this and pledged to adopt a most sincere and humble attitude to accept criticisms and make improvements in serving the public," the statement added.

Protesters formed a sea of black along roads, walkways and train stations across Hong Kong's financial centre to vent their frustration and anger at the bill and the government's handling of the resulting demonstrations. Saturday's dramatic suspension of the bill was one of the most significant political retreats by the Hong Kong government since Britain returned the territory to China in 1997, and it threw into question Lam's ability to continue to lead the city.

The protests are also the largest in Hong Kong since Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 and pose a challenge to the leadership in Beijing just as they grapple with escalating trade tensions with Washington and slowing economic growth. Critics say the planned extradition law could threaten Hong Kong's rule of law and its international reputation as an Asian financial hub. Some Hong Kong tycoons have already started moving personal wealth offshore.

### 'Don't shoot, we're HongKongers'

Some of yesterday's marchers held signs saying, "Do not shoot, we are HongKongers" - an appeal to police who fired rubber bullets and tear gas at protesters on Wednesday, injuring more than 70 people. The protest followed one the week before which organizers estimated drew 1 million people and marked the beginning of a week

of unrest ahead of the bill, which had been scheduled for debate last Wednesday. "It's much bigger today. Many more people," said one protester who gave her name as Ms Wong. "I came today because of what happened on Wednesday, with the police violence." Loud cheers rang out when activists called through loud hailers for Lam's resignation and the cry "step down" echoed through the streets.

"We want to pressure our government because (they) didn't respond to our first march," said Icy Tang, newly graduated from university in Hong Kong. "So we are coming for the second time - and hope she will listen." Activist investor David Webb, in a newsletter yesterday, said if Lam was a stock he would recommend shorting her with a target price of zero. "Call it the Carrie trade. She has irrevocably lost the public's trust," Webb said. "Her minders in Beijing, while expressing public support for now, have clearly lined her up for the chop by distancing themselves from the proposal in recent days."

### Political crisis

The protests have plunged Hong Kong into political crisis, just as months of pro-democracy "Occupy" demonstrations did in 2014, heaping pressure on Lam's administration and her official backers in Beijing. Chinese censors have been working hard to erase or block news of the protests, wary that any large public rallies could inspire demonstrations on the mainland. In a weekly blog post published on Sunday, Hong Kong Financial Secretary Paul Chan sounded a reassuring note about the city's financial position.

"Even if the external environment continues to be unclear and the social atmosphere is tense recently, overall Hong Kong's economic and financial markets are still operating in a stable and orderly manner," he wrote. In the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which China claims as its own, about 5,000 people rallied outside the parliament building in Taipei with banners saying, "No China extradition law" and "Taiwan supports Hong Kong." Some of the protesters in Hong Kong also waved Taiwan flags.



**HONG KONG:** An ambulance is pictured surrounded by thousands of protesters dressed in black during a new rally against a controversial extradition law proposal in Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

### 'Extensive meddling'

The city's independent legal system was guaranteed under laws governing Hong Kong's return from British to Chinese rule 22 years ago, and is seen by business and diplomatic communities as its strongest asset. Hong Kong has been governed under a "one country, two systems" formula since then, allowing freedoms not enjoyed in mainland China but not a fully democratic vote. Many accuse Beijing of extensive meddling, including obstruction of democratic reforms, interference with elections and of being behind the disappearance of five Hong Kong-based booksellers, start-

ing in 2015, who specialized in works critical of Chinese leaders. Pro-democracy lawmaker Claudia Mo said protests would continue if Lam did not scrap the bill. "If she refuses to scrap this controversial bill altogether, it would mean we wouldn't retreat. She stays on, we stay on," Mo said. Asked repeatedly on Saturday if she would step down, Lam avoided answering directly and appealed to the public to "give us another chance." Lam's reversal was hailed by business groups including the American Chamber of Commerce, which had spoken out strongly against the bill, and overseas governments. — Reuters

## Sea of purple: Swiss women strike for equal pay

**GENEVA:** Several hundred thousand purple-clad protesters blowing whistles, banging pots and pans and brandishing feminist slogans filled the streets of Swiss towns and cities on Friday, as women across the country went on strike for equal pay. "I love badass women" and "Eliminate the patriarchy" figured among the messages on posters and banners, as women vented their frustration with persistent gender discrimination and wage gaps in the wealthy Alpine nation.

"June 14, 2019, enters the recent history of Switzerland as the biggest political event. Considering the whole day, several hundred thousand women took part in actions, strikes and walkouts," said a statement by USS, an umbrella organization grouping 16 Swiss unions.

The action comes nearly three decades after women held the country's first nationwide strike for equal pay. Pram marches, whistle concerts and giant picnics were planned around the country, with the day's events culminating in giant demonstrations including the capital Bern (40,000 people), Zurich (70,000), Basel (40,000) and Geneva (20,000), organizers said. In Lausanne (60,000), the cathedral was lit up in the color purple. In Bern women filled the square in front of the government and parliament buildings.

Manu Bondi, 68, joined the protest alongside her daughter and granddaughter, and two friends who demonstrated with her in 1991. She said she was protesting "in solidarity with all women of all ages." "There are more of us this time than in 1991 and our demands are different," she said. "Back then it was about abortion. Now it is above all about equal pay. It is really important that women be paid according to the work they do. It is great to see people so committed."

### Burning bras

The events kicked off overnight in Lausanne, with women ringing the bells of the cathedral, and lighting a "bonfire of joy", with some women tossing in their bras. By morning, some 500 people gathered for a massive breakfast celebration, blocking traffic on one of the town's main bridges.

In Basel they projected the clenched-fist feminist symbol onto the skyscraper headquarters of pharmaceutical giant Roche. In Geneva, protesters replaced street signs bearing men's names with women's ones. While 548 streets in Geneva Canton are named after men, only 41 have female names, according to the ATS news agency. At the march, a 22-year-old topless protester, Oceane Schaub, told AFP: "I think the fact that I am bare-chested can shock and change things."

The organizers of Friday's action say things have hardly improved since the major 1991 strike, insisting women need to demand "more time, more money, more respect". Women in Switzerland on average still earn 20 percent less than men. — AFP



**GENEVA:** A woman carries a placard as she takes part in a nation-wide women's strike for wage parity in Geneva. — AFP

## Leaderless and livid: The youngsters on Hong Kong front lines

**HONG KONG:** Young Hong Kongers who marshaled the fight against a police force that was armed with tear gas and rubber bullets have spoken of how they were pushed into embracing more confrontational tactics by the failure of years of peaceful protests. In a series of interviews with AFP, the young men and women-most of them university students on leafy campuses-said they had become disillusioned with marches and civil disobedience failing to sway the city's largely unelected pro-Beijing leadership.

And with key leaders of earlier pro-democracy movements now languishing in jail, they have switched to small, leaderless cells in a bid to evade capture. Hong Kong witnessed unprecedented scenes on Wednesday as youngsters clashed with riot police outside parliament to stop lawmakers debating a hugely unpopular bill that would allow extraditions to the Chinese mainland.

One of those on the front lines, 18-year-old student Sharon, said the moment she felt peaceful rallies no longer worked came three days earlier. That day a record crowd-organizers say more than a million-marched peacefully through the streets of the international finance hub calling for the bill to be scrapped.

But shortly before midnight, Sharon's phone lit up with a statement from the government saying the bill would go ahead. "I suddenly had this realization that even though one million people marched, there wouldn't be an impact," she said, asking-like the other students-not to be identified. "This time people realized peaceful protests don't really work," she added. For people like Sharon, it was time to switch tactics in a city where democracy activists have

held huge annual marches since 2003 but made limited progress.

### Goggles and sanitary pads

Andrew, 22, said he and a group of seven friends had gone to Wednesday's protests prepared for police tear gas and pepper spray. They brought equipment like goggles, gloves and cling film-to protect their arms from tear gas burns-and sanitary pads to staunch any bleeding.

But he described their actions as organic and spontaneous, with small groups of trusted friends acting together within a larger mass, without taking directions from any centralized leadership. "No one is going to announce that I must use force or stand on the front line," he said. He said the decision to charge police and try to reach parliament happened without anyone making any order. "It might not be up to you to choose," he explained as he described the crowd dynamic that day.

"It could be because of the passion of the crowds or what police officers have done (to make you very angry)." Those tactics contrast with 2014 when similar crowds of young people took over key intersections in Hong Kong for more than two months calling for the right to elect the city's leader. Apart from occasional clashes with police, the so-called "Umbrella Movement" protests were peaceful and orderly and had key leaders.

But it failed to win any concessions and many of the movement's figures-like student leader Joshua Wong and academic Benny Tai-are currently in jail. "We choose this option because what we've done so far isn't enough to make the government feel the people's anger and discontent towards this bill. That's why we are choosing to charge," Andrew said, admitting it would be easier to coordinate if they had leaders but that few would want to take that risk.

Police have since labeled the protest a riot with a senior superintendent usually involved in organized crime investigations calling those involved "organized, premeditated, prepared, radical and violent people". The city's police



**PARIS:** The Archbishop of Paris Michel Aupetit (center) poses with other members of the clergy following the first mass in a side chapel, two months after a devastating fire engulfed the Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral. — AFP

## Notre-Dame holds the first mass since devastating blaze

**PARIS:** The Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris hosted its first mass on Saturday exactly two months after a devastating blaze that shocked the world, with priests and worshippers wearing hard hats to protect themselves against possible falling debris. Dressed in a white robe and helmet, Archbishop of Paris Michel Aupetit led the service, which was attended by just some 30 people - half of them clergy.

The mass started at 6:00 pm in the Chapel of the Virgin on the east side of the cathedral, confirmed to be safe. It was broadcast live on Catholic TV channel KTO. Aupetit was joined by the rector of Notre-Dame, Patrick Chauvet, other clergy, volunteers, people working on the restoration as well as a handful of lay worshippers. The date was chosen as it is the anniversary of the consecration of the cathedral's altar, which is celebrated every year on June 16. The date is "highly significant, spiritually," Chauvet told AFP, adding he was happy to be able to show that "Notre-Dame is truly alive".

### 'Inventive' reconstruction

President Emmanuel Macron has set an ambitious tar-

get of five years for restoring Notre-Dame, which was gutted by a fire on April 15 that felled its steeple and consumed the lattice of beams supporting the roof. The diocese is awaiting a response from the French authorities over whether it can re-open the esplanade in front of the cathedral to the public. If the authorities approve the plan, the idea is to celebrate evening prayers there, the diocese said.

The church has also floated the idea of erecting a temporary structure in front of the cathedral to welcome worshippers while the building is being repaired. Up to 150 workers have been working at the cathedral daily since the fire, continuing to remove debris and stabilize the structure. Two large white canopies have been placed above the nave and the choir to ensure the edifice is protected, including from the rain. Macron's call for an "inventive" rather than identical reconstruction of the steeple has left some architects up in arms.

Meanwhile, legislation over the reconstruction has been blocked in parliament over disagreements between the upper and lower houses and is now only expected to be adopted at the end of July. Pledges of some 850 million euros (\$960 million) had been made from prominent French businessmen and ordinary citizens but only around 10 percent of that has been donated so far. France Info public radio said just 80 million euros had been handed over, with businessmen giving the money in tranches and some private individuals renouncing their pledges due to the apparent success of the campaign. — AFP



**HONG KONG:** Protesters hold up placards as they take part in a new rally against a controversial extradition law proposal in Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

chief has defended his officers, saying potentially deadly projectiles like bricks and metal poles were being thrown. He has received the backing of the city's pro-Beijing leader Carrie Lam, who also called demonstrators rioters and refused to apologize for the clearances, even as she suspended the bill on Saturday saying she had misjudged the public mood.

In recent days police and Lam have faced a growing backlash over accusations officers used excessive force against the crowds. Rights activists and influential legal groups have called the response disproportionate, videos of the most violent police beatings have gone viral and parents have rallied holding signs reading: "Don't shoot our kids." Chris, a protester who went into battle on Wednesday with the phone number of a lawyer written on his stomach in case of arrest, said he believes there has been a sea-change among Hong Kong's often conservative public. — AFP

## Britain bans 'harmful gender stereotypes' from adverts

**LONDON:** Ads featuring "harmful gender stereotypes" which are likely to cause offence will be banned in Britain from Friday under new rules that could have a major impact on the industry. The ban by the Advertising Standards Authority would cover, for example, a woman failing to park a car, a man struggling to change a nappy or girls being less academic than boys. The ban will not include some stereotypical scenarios that are judged not to cause as much offence in ads, such as a woman cleaning or a man doing DIY tasks.

"Harmful gender stereotypes in ads can contribute to inequality in society, with costs for all of us," ASA chief executive Guy Parker said in a statement. "Put simply, we found that some portrayals in ads can, over time, play a part in limiting people's potential," he said. "It's in the interests of women and men, our economy and society that advertisers steer clear of these outdated portrayals, and we're pleased with how the industry has already begun to respond," he added.

One of the ads identified as problematic by the ASA was a 2017 television advert for Aptamil baby milk formula, which showed a baby girl growing up to be a ballerina and baby boys becoming engineers and mountain climbers. The ASA found that some parents "queried why these stereotypes were needed, feeling that they lacked diversity of gender roles and did not represent real life." Another showed a man with his feet up while a woman took sole responsibility for cleaning up her family's mess. — AFP