

Hong Kong pro-democracy protesters arrested in Catholic church

Pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong have continued to escalate into violence, with many apparent incidents of forceful police tactics, including at a Catholic church, caught on camera and uploaded to social media.

A bystander video widely circulated on social media shows at least four riot police officers entering what appear to be offices at Holy Cross Church in Hong Kong and violently subduing a protestor.

Another angle of the incident seems to show a police officer planting a hammer in the backpack of the prostrate protestor. The police arrested several protesters at the church.

Some social media users implicated Deacon Simon Chan, who works at Holy Cross Church, as having called the police to come and arrest the protesters, or at least having allowed the police to enter the church compound.

The Diocese of Hong Kong released a statement Nov. 11 countering this narrative, saying that Deacon Chan hurried to the scene as soon as the police began making their arrests.

“On his arrival, however, those protesters were already under arrest and shortly later they were escorted to the police car and taken away. Therefore, it was in fact not Deacon Simon Chan himself who allowed the police to enter the church compound,” the diocese said.

In response to queries as to why the church allowed the police to enter to arrest the protesters, the diocese stated “there is no way for a church to guarantee that those who enter it will not be arrested according to the law. We deeply regret that the above incident has taken place.”

“It is our earnest hope that the current turmoil in Hong Kong will come to an end and that the local situation will be back to normal as soon as possible,” the diocese concluded.

The protests in Hong Kong began earlier this year as mostly peaceful, large scale demonstrations against a proposal in the Hong Kong legislature that would have allowed mainland China to extradite alleged criminals from Hong Kong.

The impetus for the bill was a case involving a young Hong Kong man whom Taiwan requested be extradited for an alleged murder. Hong Kong previously has no formal extradition agreements with mainland China or Taiwan.

Christians and advocates widely opposed the bill, fearing that the Chinese government, which already seeks to control and suppress Christianity on the mainland, would use it to further tighten its grip on free exercise of religion in Hong Kong.

Beijing has for years sought to control religion in China, leading to widespread persecution. The U.S. Commission on International Religion wrote in its 2018 report that last year China “advanced its so-called ‘sinicization’ of religion, a far-reaching strategy to control, govern, and manipulate all aspects of faith into a socialist mold infused with ‘Chinese characteristics.’”

Christians, Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Falun Gong practitioners have all been affected. In September, reports emerged that churches belonging to the state-run “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” ecclesial community have been ordered to replace displays of the Ten Commandments with sayings of Chinese president Xi Jinping.

Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China. Hong Kongers enjoy freedom of worship and evangelization, while in mainland China, by contrast, there is a long history of persecution for Christians who run afoul of the government.

An estimated 1 million protesters turned out at the first major demonstration June 6. Catholics have played a major role in the protests since then.

Bishop Joseph Ha Chi-shing, an auxiliary bishop of Hong Kong, has called for prayer, asking that the faithful pray the rosary.

Bishop Ha has taken part in ecumenical prayer rallies with protesters in the past, urged an increase in prayer and said he is concerned for the safety of the many young people involved in the protests. He told CNA in September that he urges “Friday fasting” as part of the prayer for peace in Hong Kong.

Though Chief Executive Carrie Lam in October withdrew the extradition bill, protests have continued, with the most recent violent clashes taking place around the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

An unidentified protester recently told the National Catholic Register that protesters have become divided into two camps, “the so-called ‘peaceful group’ and the so-called ‘fighting group,’” noting that the extradition bill was first suspended only after the fighting group engaged the police in a major conflict June 12.

Another young Hong Konger told the Register that his decision to join the protests was guided by his Catholic faith and his sense of civic duty as a Chinese citizen in Hong Kong.

“The most fundamental concern for me is the freedom of religion, followed by the freedom of thought and speech,” he said.

"We protest because we do not trust the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP has a pretty nasty history of suppressing Christianity and other religions in China. Also, there is virtually no freedom of speech in China."

Since the protests have gone on, Beijing has instituted a travel ban for some Catholics seeking to enter the island, and Chinese officials are reportedly concerned that Catholics on the mainland could work with the Catholic Church in Hong Kong to inspire similar resistance.

Protesters are demanding that Lam resign for her failure to respond to their demands, as well as an independent inquiry into police tactics and universal suffrage throughout the island territory.

Late into Tuesday evening, protesters at several locations around Hong Kong hurled Molotov cocktails at police who fired back volleys of tear gas, the Financial Times reports.

Another video released Nov. 10 showed a police officer shooting a masked protester in the chest at point-blank range in the street while grappling with another protester. Authorities reported that the protester who was shot is in hospital in critical condition.

Another video seems to show a masked assailant dousing a man on the street in flammable liquid and setting him on fire.

Last Friday, a 22-year-old protester died from injuries related to a fall.

Catholic leaders have continued to echo protesters' calls for an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality.

"I ask the Lord to move the government of the special administrative region to respond to the public opinion, and set up an 'Independent Commission of inquiry' so that the community can begin with the truth and begin the path of real reconciliation," Bishop Ha wrote on Facebook Oct. 21.

Legislation has been introduced in the US Senate to support the protesters, drawing veiled threats from a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman that passing such a measure "will seriously harm the United States' own interests."

The "Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act" has 37 Republican and Democratic co-sponsors in the 100-member Senate, and backers say it is expected to pass easily if Majority Leader Mitch McConnell schedules a vote, CNBC reports.