Hong Kong Protests Grow at Start of Two Day Holiday

By Bloomberg News - Sep 30, 2014

Pro-democracy protests swelled in Hong Kong on the eve of a two-day holiday that may bring record numbers to rallies spreading throughout the city as organizers pressed demands for free elections.

With the workday ended and temperatures dropping, thousands of people were returning to the three main demonstration points, blocking some of the city's roadways. Hong Kong marks China’s National Day tomorrow, the 65th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China and Chung Yeung Festival on Thursday, when Hong Kong people honor their ancestors.

“It’s quite possible that at least more than 100,000, if not up to 300,000, 400,000 people, will join in the protest in a show of people’s power,” Willy Lam, adjunct professor at Chinese University of Hong Kong, said in an interview today. “They want to convince the Hong Kong government and Beijing that any use of force will be counter-productive. It will only galvanize more of the rest of Hong Kong’s 7 million people.”

SLIDESHOW: Hong Kong Democracy Standoff In Pictures

The movement, kick-started by students on Sept. 26, swelled following weekend clashes with riot police who used tear gas to disperse crowds. Student leaders said today that the protests would spread if their demands aren’t met for Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying to resign and for the government in Beijing to drop plans to control the 2017 leadership election.

The government has pulled anti-riot police off the streets with officers standing off to avoid the clashes of Sept. 28 that angered demonstrators. The benchmark Hang Seng Index dipped again, marking its biggest two-day decline since February.

Roads Blocked

Roads leading into the Admiralty district, where protesters have surrounded the government headquarters, continued to be blocked with workers commuting by foot and metro. Crowds this evening are also gathering at the popular shopping districts of Causeway Bay and Mong Kok.

“This movement is to achieve universal suffrage and get the National People’s Congress to take back their decision,” Alex Chow, one of the student leaders, said at a press conference today. “Yet we see that CY Leung doesn’t seem to be communicating with the top and with the people and he doesn’t understand what democracy is. So to achieve democracy, we must start with asking Leung to step down.”
When asked at a press conference today whether he would resign, Leung said that “any personnel changes” would result in the existing election committee choosing his successor, rather than through a vote.

**Long Days**

At the briefing, Leung dismissed speculation that the People’s Liberation Army, which was used to crush the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, would be used in Hong Kong. He also said that the city was preparing for the protests to last.

“The impact from Occupy Central would not be just three to five days -- it could be quite long,” Leung said, citing the protesters’ road blocks, medical aid centers and supply stations.

The students called for Leung to respond to their demands by tomorrow. Leung is due to mark the founding of modern China at an 8 a.m. ceremony near where the main protests are being held. The popular firework show over Victoria Harbour for the holiday has been canceled.

The demonstrations coincide with Golden Week, a week-long holiday in China when hundreds of thousands of people from the mainland travel to Hong Kong. Some retailers are closing outlets, with *Chow Tai Fook Jewellery Group Ltd.*, the world’s largest jewelry chain, shutting about 20 shops today, after keeping more than 25 closed yesterday.

**Property Prices**

The real estate market is also feeling the effects of the protests. Apartment viewings dropped 50 percent because of the unrest, Centaline Property Agency Ltd, the biggest privately held realtor in Hong Kong, said in an e-mail. Prices may show a decline if the rallies last more than a week, the broker said.

The protests -- spurred by China’s decision last month that candidates for the 2017 leadership election must be vetted by a committee -- pose the biggest challenge to China’s control of the city since British colonial rule ended in 1997.

At the time, the Chinese government pledged to maintain the city’s freedoms under its “one country, two systems” approach. China had endorsed the idea of holding elections in Hong Kong as far back as 1990 with the adoption of the city’s basic law, a type of constitution. As China’s influence has grown within the Hong Kong government, pro-democracy activists stepped up their fight for a open election when the city holds its first vote for chief executive in 2017.

The clashes with police this week were the city’s biggest since unrest in the 1960s led by pro-Communist groups inspired by Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution. Police arrested 89 people during the weekend demonstrations, a spokesman said.

**Foreign Support**

The U.S. government supports the aspirations of the Hong Kong people for universal suffrage and
called on the authorities to exercise restraint, said White House spokesman Josh Earnest.

U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron’s government said it was important for Hong Kong to preserve rights and freedoms for its people, including the right to demonstrate, according to an e-mailed statement from the Foreign Office. Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou, whose government fled after losing China’s civil war, said he supports the Hong Kong people’s pursuit of democracy.

Hong Kong is part of China, and foreign governments should not interfere with its internal affairs, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said yesterday.

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