Fierce clashes in Hong Kong as police lay siege to university

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A Hong Kong university remains under siege after a second day of ferocious clashes between riot police and protesters holed up on the campus. Officers from the special tactical contingent, known as the “raptors”, had attempted to storm the university on Monday but were beaten back by volleys of petrol bombs that set the main entrance to Hong Kong Polytechnic University ablaze. Black-clad young protesters throwing Molotov cocktails fought fierce battles with police in the streets around the university as they attempted to break the siege. By Monday evening, student union representatives estimated that there were still 500 people occupying the campus.

The siege of PolyU comes after the most violent week in the city’s months-long political crisis. At least one person was shot by police, another was set on fire, a 70-year-old man died after he was hit in the head by a flying brick and the police warned the city was on “the brink of total collapse”.

China’s ambassador to the UK on Monday condemned the protesters in strident terms, saying they had “turned many universities into their strongholds and attacked students from the Chinese mainland”. If the situation becomes uncontrollable, the central government will not sit on its hands and watch. We have enough resolution and power to end the violence and unrest Liu Xiaoming, China’s ambassador to the UK Speaking at a press conference in London, Liu Xiaoming denounced the pro-democracy side for carrying out “inhuman, murderous violence in broad daylight” which he said was turning the city into an “abyss of chaos”. “The future of Hong Kong, if such situation continues, would be unimaginably dreadful,” he added.

However, despite repeated questioning, Mr Liu would not clarify at what point China’s People’s Liberation Army would step in to assist Hong Kong police. “[The PLA] is already there in Hong Kong garrison to show China’s sovereignty,” he said. “If the situation becomes uncontrollable, the central government will not sit on its hands and watch. We have enough resolution and power to end the violence and unrest.”

Mike Pompeo, secretary of state, said the US was “greatly concerned by the deepening political unrest and violence”, and maintained that Hong Kong’s government should bear “primary responsibility for bringing calm to Hong Kong.” “Unrest and violence cannot be resolved by law enforcement efforts alone. The government must take clear steps to address public concerns,” he said, adding: “The Chinese Communist party must honour its promises to the Hong Kong people, who only want the freedoms and liberties that they have been promised in the Sino-British Joint Declaration, a UN filed treaty.”

The European Commission said that violence in response to the protests was unacceptable and called on law enforcement authorities to keep their action “strictly proportionate”. The UK Foreign Office has also voiced concern. “We need to see an end to the violence, and for all sides to engage in meaningful political dialogue ahead of the District Council elections on Sunday,” an FCO spokesperson said. The violence has prompted most universities to end classes for the rest of the semester, and triggered an exodus of mainland Chinese and some international students.

The brutality and prospect of a harsher crackdown have battered Hong Kong’s economy, with retail sales and tourism collapsing in recent months. The Hong Kong government expects the city will fall into its first annual recession since the global financial crisis in 2009. Many wealthier residents and expatriates are considering leaving Hong Kong, at least temporarily, with schools set to remain closed for a fourth consecutive day on Tuesday, much of the city’s transport paralysed and university campuses engulfed in flames.

The PolyU campus in Kowloon is almost directly above the main cross-harbour tunnel leading to Hong Kong Island and the city’s financial district. Demonstrators have blocked the tunnel since last week. A 17-year-old high school student who declined to give his name escaped by climbing over a wall. “I was there to protect the school, and our brothers and sisters,” he said. “There is no way to retreat. Whatever we do: advance or stay is a route to death.” A Reuters journalist inside the university said conditions were deteriorating, with food running short and the protesters tiring. During the day on Monday, office workers once again marched in support of protesters through the central business district. A 27-year-old who works in the financial services industry said the university sieges and the use of tear gas during lunchtime rallies last week had motivated white-collar workers to come out on to the streets again. “I think a lot of people who were on the sidelines, [who] usually won’t actively participate in movements, they have been more forthcoming,” he said.

The demonstrators were given a boost by a ruling from Hong Kong’s high court that a contentious anti-mask law was unconstitutional, saying the restrictions it imposed on fundamental rights went “further than is reasonably necessary”. The government announced the wearing of masks would now be allowed. Recommended Hong Kong politics Xi ratchets up the pressure on Hong Kong to quell the violence PolyU is just metres away from the historic Gun Club Hill barracks, former home to squadrons of the British Army’s legendary Gurkhas but occupied since 1997 by PLA troops from mainland China. Hong Kong’s benchmark stock index was up 1.4 per cent at the close of trading, its best day in two weeks — despite the political upheaval. Brokers said the Hang Seng index was buoyed by hopes of progress in trade negotiations between the US and China.