Dutch police clash with anti-lockdown rioters in two cities

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Recent incidents were the worst violence to hit the Netherlands since the pandemic began. (Photo: Robin Van Lomkhuijsen / AFP)

Amsterdam, January 24 (RHC)-- Demonstrations against a new curfew to curb the spread of the coronavirus in the Netherlands have turned into riots and clashes with police in some places, according to authorities and reports.

Authorities on Sunday used water cannon and dogs in a square in central Amsterdam, where hundreds of people gathered during the curfew that began on Saturday, public television NOS reported. Videos showed police spraying people grouped against a wall of the Van Gogh Museum.

Protesters, organized in part by restaurant owners fed up with the country's long-lasting lockdown measures, carried a banner saying "Stop The Lockdown." The crowd of hundreds was also believed to include supporters of the anti-immigrant group PEGIDA. Police said they detained more than 100 people for throwing stones and fireworks.

In Eindhoven in the country's south, police fired tear gas to disperse a crowd of several hundred, regional television Omroep Brabant reported. Several vehicles were burned and businesses at Eindhoven's central train station were looted, media reports said. There were no immediate reports of injuries.

Dutch rail company NS called on travellers to avoid the Eindhoven station, where it said train circulation was interrupted due to the intervention of emergency services nearby. A COVID-19 testing center was also set on fire on Saturday evening in the village of Urk in the north of the country, local authorities said.

The 9 pm to 4:30 am curfew is the country's first since World War II, with Prime Minister Mark Rutte saying it is needed to bring down virus case numbers. Violators face a 95-euro ($115) fine. Exemptions are possible, in particular for people returning from funerals or those having to work, but on condition that they present a certificate.

Police said they fined more than 3,600 people nationwide for breaching the curfew, and arrested 25 people for flouting the curfew or for violence.

The recent incidents were the worst violence to hit the Netherlands since the pandemic began and the second straight Sunday that police clashed with rioters in Amsterdam.   The police and municipal officials issued a statement on Sunday expressing their anger at rioting, "from throwing fireworks and stones to destroying police cars and with the torching of the test location as a deep point."

Rutte also announced on Wednesday a ban on flights from the United Kingdom, South Africa and South America, and a cut in the number of guests allowed in people's homes to one, from the previous limit of two.

New variants of the virus have led to deep concern in Europe, particularly a more infectious strain that first emerged in the UK. The Netherlands was already under its toughest measures since the start of the pandemic, with bars and restaurants having closed in October, and schools and non-essential shops shut since December.

Rutte and his cabinet resigned on January 22nd over a scandal involving child tax benefits, but they will continue to govern until elections in mid-March.

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