

Dutch police fire warning shots as COVID protests rock Rotterdam



Police said the protests descended into rioting with dozens of people arrested and seven people injured [Killian Lindenburg/EPA]

Rotterdam, November 20 (RHC)-- Dutch police fired warning shots, injuring several people, after protests in Rotterdam against a partial COVID-19 lockdown turned violent with some demonstrators torching a police car and throwing stones.

Chaos broke out after a protest in the port city against recently-introduced coronavirus restrictions and government plans to restrict access for unvaccinated people to some venues.

Dozens of people were arrested and seven people were injured in total, including police officers, during a nighttime rampage along one of Rotterdam's main shopping streets.

The Netherlands went back into western Europe's first partial lockdown of the winter season a week ago. The restrictions, which affect restaurants, shops and sport, are expected to remain in force for at least three weeks.

Rotterdam mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb described the scene as an "orgy of violence." "The police have felt the need to draw a police weapon in the end to defend themselves," he told reporters.

Police said in a statement that the demonstration that started on the Coolensingel street "has resulted in riots. Fires have been set in several places. Fireworks were set off and police fired several warning shots."

"There are injuries related to the fired shots," they added. They did not give a number but Dutch public broadcaster NOS said two people were hurt. Dutch media said several hundred protesters shouted slogans including "freedom," then threw stones at police and firefighters and set fire to several electric scooters. Police used water cannons to try to disperse the crowd.

The situation had largely calmed later on Friday night, but there was a heavy police presence.

Photos in Dutch media showed at least one police car ablaze and another with a bicycle smashed through the windshield.

Rotterdam authorities issued an emergency order banning people from gathering in the area "to maintain public order", while its main railway station was closed.

The Netherlands is trying to control a new wave of the coronavirus, with more than 21,000 new cases reported on Friday. The government is now considering excluding the unvaccinated from bars and restaurants, allowing access only to those who have been fully vaccinated or who have recovered from the disease.

Similar steps have already been taken in neighboring Germany. Austria has moved into a full lockdown and plans to make vaccines mandatory.

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