

Canada resumes clearing protesters from U.S. border bridge



Police officers stand guard in front of a car during COVID-19 protests in Canada

Ottawa, February 13 (RHC)-- Police officers began arresting the remaining protesters near a key US-Canadian border bridge, trying to end one of the main demonstrations that broke out across Canada against COVID-19 vaccine mandates and other restrictions.

Police in Ontario province's city of Windsor said in a tweet on Sunday arrests were being made and vehicles towed just after dawn near the Ambassador Bridge linking the US city of Detroit. "Enforcement will continue in the demonstration area and there will be zero tolerance for illegal activity. The public should avoid the area," police said.

Since Monday, protesters in trucks, cars and vans have blocked traffic in both directions at North America's busiest land border crossing, choking the supply chain for Detroit's automakers. Police on Saturday persuaded demonstrators to move their vehicles used to block the crossing that sees 25 percent of all trade between the two countries. However, the crossing remained closed on Sunday.

Only two pick-up trucks and less than a dozen protesters blocked the road to the bridge before police moved in, according to The Associated Press. Police barricades remained and it was not immediately clear when the bridge might be opened.

In Canada's capital Ottawa, the ranks of protesters swelled to what police said were 4,000 demonstrators on Sunday. The city has seen as many demonstrators on past weekends, and loud music played as people milled about downtown where anti-vaccine protesters have been encamped since late January.

A former cabinet minister in Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government took the unusual step of calling out her former federal colleagues as well as the province and city for not putting an end to the protests.

"Amazingly, this isn't just Ottawa. It's the nation's capital," Catherine McKenna tweeted. "But no one – not the city, the province or the federal government can seem to get their act together to end this illegal occupation. It's appalling ... Just get your act together. Now."

U.S. President Joe Biden asked Trudeau to use federal powers to end the blockade of the Ambassador Bridge. Trudeau has so far rejected calls to use the military, but said "all options are on the table" to end the protests that have affected the economy on both sides of the border.

Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson declared a state of emergency last week for the capital, where hundreds of trucks remained in front of parliament buildings and demonstrators have set up portable toilets outside the prime minister's office, where Trudeau's motorcade usually parks.

Ottawa police said in a statement late Saturday a joint command centre had been established with the Ontario Provincial Police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. They said that would beef up enforcement capabilities that had been limited by "safety concerns – arising from aggressive, illegal behavior by many demonstrators – [that] limited police enforcement capabilities".

Police earlier issued a statement calling the protest an unlawful occupation and saying they were waiting for reinforcements before implementing a plan to end the demonstrations.

Back in Windsor, even after protesters' vehicles were removed on Saturday, hundreds more arrived to bolster the crowd and settled into a face-off with police about two blocks away, waving flags and yelling. While there were no visible physical confrontations, the crowd still controlled the road to the bridge.

On Friday, a judge ordered an end to the blockade of mostly pick-up trucks and cars, and Ontario Premier Doug Ford declared a state of emergency allowing for fines of \$100,000 and up to one year in jail for anyone illegally blocking roads, bridges, walkways and other infrastructure.

With the bridge closed, automobile plants on both sides of the border have been forced to shut down or reduce production. The standoff came at a time when the industry is already struggling to maintain production in the face of pandemic-induced shortages of computer chips and other supply-chain disruptions.

While the protesters are decrying vaccine mandates for truckers and other COVID-19 restrictions, many of Canada's public health measures, such as mask rules and vaccine passports for getting into restaurants and theatres, are already falling away as the Omicron variant surge levels off.

The vast majority of Canadians are vaccinated, and the COVID-19 death rate is one-third that of the United States.

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