

Canada begins crackdown on protests with arrest of over 100 people

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Ottawa, February 19 (RHC)-- Canadian forces have begun an unprecedented operation to remove protesters and their trucks and cars in Ottawa, arresting more than 100 protesters and towing their vehicles.

The "Freedom Convoy" protests across Canada turned violent late Friday, with police authorities saying protesters assaulted officers and tried to remove their weapons. "Anyone within the unlawful protest site may be arrested," police authorities warned on three occasions via Twitter posts.

Interim Ottawa Police Chief Steve Bell had declared earlier that authorities would work all day and all night to move protesters out. Local media outlets showed live pictures of several arrests made without incident as police searches and arrests continued at a location less than a half-mile from the main protest site at Parliament Hill.

Legislative debate on using the Emergencies Act was slated to continue, said House of Commons Speaker Anthony Rota in a statement, noting that the legislature will not meet because of police activity in downtown Ottawa.

The convoy first arrived in Ottawa on January 29 to express their disapproval of a vaccine mandate to enter the country or face testing requirements. Over the course of more than two weeks, the protest has spiraled into a wider grievance against all Covid-19 restrictions, including mandatory mask-wearing and vaccinations.

Ottawa police began erecting barriers and fencing throughout the downtown core on Thursday in an effort to clear the area of demonstrators, who have used trucks to block city roads and remained defiant amid calls by police to disperse.

Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau defended his decision to invoke emergency powers to put an end to the demonstrations during an address to legislators amid opposition in Parliament. Officials have said a primary aim of invoking the Emergencies Act is to stifle funding to the demonstrators in Ottawa.

"These illegal blockades are being heavily supported by individuals in the United States and from elsewhere around the world," Trudeau insisted. "We see that roughly half of the funding that is flowing to the barricaders here is coming from the United States. The goal of all measures, including financial measures in the Emergencies Act, is to deal with the current threat only, and to get the situation fully under control."

The act, passed in 1988 and never before invoked, can temporarily suspend citizens' rights to free movement or assembly. It can also provide for the use of the military, but Trudeau has said this would not be necessary.

Slamming Trudeau's call to invoke emergency powers, interim leader of the Conservative Party Candice Bergen emphasized that the party won't be supporting a motion by the federal government to fully use those powers. "The first act that he does when he has a chance to do something -- he doesn't go through step one, two, three -- he goes straight to 100 and invokes the Emergencies Act," Bergen told the local CTV News. "I don't think anything that we will see will change our mind, we will be opposing it."

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