

*Canadian police use pepper
spray, stun grenades to clear
protesters*



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Ottawa, February 20 (RHC)-- Canadian police on Saturday used pepper spray and stun grenades in a final push to clear the capital of trucks and demonstrators who occupied downtown Ottawa for more than three weeks to protest against pandemic restrictions.

After clearing a portion of the blockade and making more than 100 arrests on Friday, 47 more arrests were made on Saturday morning as police moved quickly to disperse the main portion of the blockade in front of parliament and the prime minister's office.

Police used loudspeakers to warn the crowd to disperse or face arrest. Some loud bangs of stun grenades were heard. People were sprayed with “a chemical irritant in an effort to stop the assaultive behavior and for officer's safety,” police said. “We told you to leave. We gave you time to leave. We were slow and methodical, yet you were assaultive and aggressive with officers,” police said in a statement to the truckers posted on Twitter.

Protest organizers for the so-called Freedom Convoy said they had asked truckers to withdraw because of heavy-handed police tactics, and many trucks did exit the downtown core on Saturday. Thirty-eight vehicles have been towed away, police said.

Officers smashed vehicle windows to arrest people locked inside, but the overall number of protesters dwindled dramatically compared with previous days, with a couple hundred remaining near the advancing police cordon.

Some of those arrested on Saturday wore body armour and had smoke grenades and other fireworks in their bags and vehicles, police said. Protesters threw smoke canisters, police said. Several large trucks that have been parked in front of parliament for weeks drove away as the police approached their position.

The protesters initially wanted an end to cross-border COVID-19 vaccine mandates for truck drivers, but the blockade has gradually turned into a demonstration against the government and against Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

“This is our final stand ... When it ends, it ends and it's in God's hands,” said Jeremy Glass, a protester from Shelburne, Ontario. “At the end of this, we all need to get back to unity and get rid of this division.”

A 37-year-old woman, who would only identify herself as Maggie from Peterborough, Ontario, sat on bales of hay in front of a tent on Wellington Street. She said this is the beginning of a movement, not the end. “We're not just going to go back in our box and be scared anymore. We have a tribe. We're going to stay together, hold the line wherever that may be. We're going to stand up for each other.”

Trudeau on Monday invoked emergency powers to give his government wider authority to stop the protests. He authorised banks and financial institutions to temporarily freeze the accounts of those suspected of supporting the blockades, without obtaining a court order.

Financial services providers have used the emergency powers to freeze at least 76 accounts with a total of 3.2 million Canadian dollars (\$2.5 million), Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino said on Saturday. The federal government said on Saturday it would provide up to 20 million Canadian dollars (\$15.7 million) to Ottawa businesses that have suffered losses because of the blockades.

Debate in parliament about the emergency powers resumed on Saturday, and a final vote is scheduled for Monday. Trudeau's Liberals and opposition New Democrats have indicated their support, which should ensure its passage.

American politicians, including former President Donald Trump, have expressed support for the protesters, as has Tesla Inc's chief executive, Elon Musk, who on Saturday replied on Twitter to a woman asking him to help the protesters.

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