

UK police powers expanded to crack down on protests

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Extinction Rebellion climate change protesters block a road and demonstrate outside the Royal Courts of Justice in London, the United Kingdom [File: Vickie Flores/EPA-EFE

London, July 4 (RHC)-- New and expanded powers for British police have taken effect including measures targeting activists who stop road traffic and major construction works with protests. Authorities have repeatedly condemned environmental groups – including Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion – that seek to raise awareness about the urgency of climate change by staging multiple high-profile

demonstrations at the busiest highways and roads.

Their protests in recent years often caused serious disruptions for motorists. Starting Sunday, police will have powers to forcibly move static demonstrations.

Critics argue the toughened laws are a threat to the right to protest, but officials in the United Kingdom say the measures are needed to stop “disruption from a selfish minority.” “The public have had enough of their lives being disrupted by selfish protesters. The mayhem we’ve seen on our streets has been a scandal,” Home Secretary Suella Braverman said.

Authorities say under the new Public Order Act, protesters found guilty of “tunnelling” – or digging underground tunnels to obstruct the building of new infrastructure works – could face three years in prison. Anyone found guilty of obstructing a major transportation project could be jailed for up to six months.

The law also makes “locking on” -- or protesters attaching themselves to other people, objects or buildings -- a criminal offence.

Hundreds of climate change protesters were arrested last year in the UK for blocking major roads and bridges. Many activists protested by sitting in the middle of the roads or gluing themselves to the street to make them harder to disperse.

This civil disobedience is a wave of direct action that has also seen activists glue themselves to famous museum paintings or throw soup at artwork to draw media attention to their cause. Police say it is costly to deal with the protests and it diverts thousands of officers from other work such as dealing with crime.

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