

Arrests as anti-lockdown protesters clash with police in Sydney

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In Melbourne, thousands of protesters without masks turned out in downtown chanting 'freedom' [Con Chronis/AFP]

Sydney, July 24 (RHC)-- Thousands of anti-lockdown protesters have taken to the streets of Sydney and other major Australian cities to protest against coronavirus restrictions as infections hit a new record and authorities warned of a “growing problem.”

In Sydney, the unmasked participants on Saturday marched from Victoria Park to Town Hall in the central business district, carrying signs calling for “freedom” and “the truth”.

There was a heavy police presence in the city, including mounted police and riot officers in response to what authorities said was unauthorised protest activity. Police confirmed a number of arrests had been made after crowds broke through barriers and threw plastic bottles and plants.

The New South Wales (NSW) police said it recognised and supported the rights of free speech and peaceful assembly, but the protest was a breach of public health orders. “The priority for NSW Police is always the safety of the wider community,” a police statement said.

The protest comes as COVID-19 case numbers in the state reached another record with 163 new infections in the last 24 hours. Greater Sydney has been locked down for the past four weeks, with residents able to leave home only with a reasonable excuse.

“We live in a democracy and normally I am certainly one who supports people’s rights to protest ... but at the present time we’ve got cases going through the roof and we have people thinking that’s OK to get out there and possibly be close to each other at a demonstration,” said Brad Hazzard, state health minister.

Stephen Jones, a member of the national parliament from Sydney, condemned the protesters as “selfish, reckless idiots.” “Nobody wants to be in lockdown. This is exactly how you keep it going.”

In Melbourne, thousands of protesters without masks turned out in the city centre chanting “freedom.” Some of them lit flares as they gathered outside Victoria state’s Parliament House. They held banners, including one that read: “This is not about a virus it’s about total government control of the people.”

A car protest rally is also planned in Adelaide, which is also under lockdown, with police warning they will make arrests over unlawful activity. After escaping much of the early pandemic unscathed, about half of Australia’s 25 million people are now in lockdown across several cities.

There is growing anger at the restrictions – which are often only partially observed – and the conservative government’s failure to provide adequate vaccine supplies.

According to health authorities, only 11 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.

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