

Hong Kong protests swell after talks called off

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Thousands of people bolstered numbers at protest sites in central Hong Kong last night after the government called off talks with student leaders scheduled for yesterday afternoon. With protests now entering their third week, the organisers have threatened to escalate their actions unless they receive a response to their demands for full and open elections in 2017 for the post of chief executive.

Chief Secretary Carrie Lam, the territory's number 2 official, scuttled the planned talks, accusing leaders from the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Scholarism of making public remarks that "seriously undermined" the basis for constructive dialogue. Lam objected, in particular, to calls for renewed large protests if the discussions failed.

Even if they had proceeded, the talks were unlikely to reach any agreement. Lam yesterday reiterated that the discussions would take place within the framework set by China's National People's Congress. It announced in late August that the 2017 election would be held under universal suffrage, for the first time, but restricted candidates to those chosen by a nomination committee stacked with pro-Beijing appointees. The student organisations are calling for the vetting of candidates to be removed.

Having failed to end the demonstrations, Lam and other senior Hong Kong officials are heading off to the neighbouring city of Ghangzhou in southern China, ostensibly to attend a business forum. Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying is due to join them on Sunday. Undoubtedly, the Hong Kong leaders will use the opportunity for talks with Chinese government leaders over the political crisis in the territory.

While Beijing has publicly given its full support to Leung, his position was weakened on Thursday by revelations in the Fairfax Media in Australia that he was secretly paid \$US6.4 million in fees by an Australian company, UGL, during its acquisition in

2011 of a British property services firm, DTZ Holdings, which Leung helped run.

Leung was not Hong Kong chief executive at the time and no one has alleged, at this stage, that he did anything illegal. UGL insists that the contract was "a standard non-poach, non-compete arrangement." However, the money was paid in two instalments, in 2012 and 2013, after he took office in 2012. Moreover, UGL, holds a long-term contract with the government-controlled MTR Corporation, which runs the city's subway system, raising issues of conflict of interest.

Leung was selected as chief executive, under the current system, by a 1,200-member committee handpicked by Beijing. He was not, however, Beijing's first choice in a three-candidate "contest." He only got the job after his chief rival, Tang Ying-yen, was hit by a series of damaging scandals. The third candidate from the official opposition pan-Democrat camp—Albert Ho—ran a distant last. Ho was allowed to stand simply to give a fig leaf of legitimacy to the charade. (See: "Sham election in Hong Kong reveals sharp social tensions")

Hong Kong's Independent Commission against Corruption has announced that it has received submissions from pan-Democrat legislators asking it to investigate Leung. Ho, the former Democratic Party leader, told the *New York Times* that Leung has "double loyalties—to the people of Hong Kong whom he is supported to serve, and to a corporation that has active business in Hong Kong."

At the main protest site in Admiralty near Hong Kong's central administrative offices, student leaders last night dismissed a statement by Chief Secretary Lam that the protests had been dwindling. HKFS vice secretary Lester Shum described the rally there, put at more than 10,000 by the *South China Morning Post*, as a "slap in the face" to Lam. The student group earlier in the day threatened to "escalate" its campaign if the

government refused to talk, and mentioned the option of re-blockading the government building.

Any resumption of the blockade would likely lead to a confrontation. Last weekend, Chief Executive Leung warned that the police would take “all actions necessary” to ensure government employees could get to work. In response, student groups and the other main protest organisation, Occupy Central, lifted the blockade but maintained a presence in the streets at Admiralty and two other protest sites.

Following the breakdown of talks, protesters began consolidating their occupation of the streets by pitching tents and bringing in portable toilets and showers. The police called for the removal of obstacles blocking main roads but set no deadline.

The Hong Kong government has sought to exploit frustration among layers of businesses and working people over the disruptions caused by the demonstrations. A coalition of truck drivers’ associations set a deadline of October 15 to open the roads and warned it would remove any remaining barricades.

The US has so far adopted a low-key approach, calling for “restraint” by Beijing and city authorities and appealing for dialogue to defuse the situation. On Thursday, however, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China used its 2014 annual report on human rights to advocate a greater intrusion into Hong Kong politics.

The commission, which includes US lawmakers and Obama administration officials, expressed concern about the “fragile freedoms and rule of law that distinguish Hong Kong from mainland China.” It called for greater focus on Hong Kong through high-level meetings and visits to the territory, and US legislation requiring the US Secretary of State to report “on conditions in Hong Kong of interest to the United States.”

Washington’s concern for “human rights” in Hong Kong is no more than a pretext for undermining Beijing’s rule in the city that it has administered as a special administrative region since Britain handed over its former colony in 1997. The Obama administration is engaged in a diplomatic offensive and military build-up against China throughout the region as part of its “pivot to Asia.”

China’s foreign affairs ministry issued a statement

criticising the committee for sending “the wrong signals” on the Hong Kong protests. Speaking in Berlin, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang declared: “Hong Kong’s affairs belong to the internal affairs of China and all other countries must respect each other’s sovereignty.”

The Chinese government is concerned that the US will exploit the protests not only to increase its influence in Hong Kong, but to encourage political unrest on the Chinese mainland under conditions of a sharp economic slowdown and mounting social tensions.



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