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ASIA

Hong Kong Protesters Say 'Dead' Isn't Enough for Extradition Bill

Chief Executive Carrie Lam's assurances on legislation draw criticism for not going far enough



Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam holds a news conference Tuesday. PHOTO: JUSTIN CHIN/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Chuin-Wei Yap and Joyu Wang

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HONG KONG—Opponents of Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam vowed further protests, dealing a setback to her attempt to quash unrest sparked by a bill that would legalize extradition to China.

Mrs. Lam said Tuesday that the bill was “dead,” but didn’t say that it would be withdrawn. Barely two hours after she spoke, the Civil Human Rights Front, a broad coalition organizing opposition to the measure, held a news conference to dismiss her remarks.

“All the things she said do not mean anything, as far as we can see,” said the group’s vice convener, Bonnie Leung. “Two million people have already come out on the streets. This figure will not go away. Does the government hear the people’s voice?”

Mrs. Lam’s office declined to clarify her remarks.

Her statement Tuesday that the bill is dead was her strongest so far on the legislation. Opponents want her to make clear it has been withdrawn. They also want Mrs. Lam's resignation, an independent inquiry into police conduct during the demonstrations and the dropping of charges against protesters who have been arrested.

Protest organizers say that despite Mrs. Lam's comments they continue to plan more demonstrations, moving deeper into Hong Kong's suburbs as early as this weekend, fanning out beyond the usual small area clustered around government headquarters.

The distinction in the description of the bill's status may not be obvious to outsiders, but it has become a key point of contention for protesters, millions of whom have marched to demand it be withdrawn.

Mrs. Lam's statement drew mockery among Hong Kong protesters and their sympathizers on social media. Biblically tinged witticisms sprang up on Facebook and the Reddit-like social news website LIHKG, which is popularly associated with young activists in Hong Kong's protest movement.

"The bill has died. The bill is risen. The bill will come again," a user called Aron Yuen posted on Facebook.

Mrs. Lam has repeatedly declined to say that the bill is "withdrawn," language that is a central demand of protesters and which they have enshrined in formal statements and spray-painted on the walls of government buildings. On several occasions in the past month, as protests mounted, Mrs. Lam and her advisers have described the bill as being in various stages of anthropomorphic decline, from "will die," to "dying a natural death," to Tuesday's remark that it was "dead."

Pro-Beijing legislators said criticism of Mrs. Lam's comments amounted to an argument over semantics and that the government still needed to improve on its communications.

"The government has difficulty recruiting an able communicator," said Regina Ip, a lawmaker and former contender for the chief executive post. "Our civil servants are brought up to be technocrats."

Mrs. Lam has spent her career in the city's civil service. She has been loath to make concessions after the biggest protests in the city's history against a bill she sponsored. But quelling unrest has taken on more urgency since Beijing warned that it could intervene directly if the protests worsen.

Mrs. Lam blamed her government for a "total failure" in carrying out preparatory work on the bill.

“Even if she fully pulls the bill now, is it enough at this point?” said David Zweig, former social sciences professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

The refusal to say the bill is withdrawn is likely face-saving for Mrs. Lam and the central government in Beijing, which had approved the bill, Mr. Zweig said.

As a former British colony returned to China in 1997, Hong Kong enjoys limited autonomy from Beijing. Millions of people took to the streets in the past month to demonstrate against the legislation, which would allow anyone—from tourists to businesspeople to dissidents—to be extradited to China from Hong Kong. China has a far more opaque legal system.

China’s Foreign Ministry on Tuesday said the government had expressed its “respect and understanding” when Hong Kong suspended the bill on June 15.

On Sunday, tens of thousands of people attended a rally in Kowloon, a part of Hong Kong that draws throngs of Chinese tourists, in an effort to take the protesters’ message “directly to mainland China.”

—*Eva Dou in Beijing contributed to this article.*

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