

Protesters opposed to COVID measures clash with police in Paris



A protester holds a placard reading "Health pass first step to hell..." during a demonstration called by the Yellow Vest (gilets jaunes) Movement [Benoit Tessier/Reuters]

Paris, July 24 (RHC)-- Anti-vaccination protesters and other demonstrators against COVID-19 restrictions in France clashed with the police in central Paris on Saturday, leading anti-riot forces to use tear gas, BTM Television reported.

Far-right activists and members of France's yellow vest movement were part of the rally in Paris against a bill requiring everyone to have a special virus pass to enter restaurants and other venues and mandating COVID-19 vaccinations for all healthcare workers.

Beyond Paris, protests were expected to take place in cities such as Marseille, Montpellier, Nantes and Toulouse. Heidi Larson, a professor of anthropology, risk and decision science at the department of infectious disease epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, told Al Jazeera that the health pass "makes a lot of sense".

"And ironically for those who want their freedoms, the vaccine can allow different freedoms," she said. "When you think about it, the options to this pass is that we close restaurants, we stop large gatherings. We have to give somewhere if we want to get ahead of this virus," Larson said.

Gabriel Scally, a visiting professor of public health at the University of Bristol, told Al Jazeera that there was nothing new to the opposition to the pandemic measures. "I think these rallies are relatively small. All the way through the pandemic, we have seen small groups of people who have taken to the streets to express their opposition to various things," he said.

"Some believe that the virus does not exist, that COVID-19 doesn't exist. Some think that it's a conspiracy from all sorts of people, including Bill Gates..." "It isn't anything new. There has been opposition to vaccines in history. It's new and people are dealing with various issues. There are always a small group of people who are opposed."

Legislators in France's senate are debating the bill on Saturday after the lower house of parliament approved it on Friday. French virus infections are spiking and hospitalisations are rising anew.

The government is trying to speed up vaccination to protect vulnerable populations and hospitals and avoid new lockdowns. Most French adults are fully vaccinated and polls indicate a majority of French people support the new measures.

But not everyone. Protesters chanting "Liberty! Liberty!" marched through Paris in one of multiple demonstrations planned on Saturday. Last weekend, more than 100,000 people protested across France against the measures.

They included far-right politicians and activists as well as some others angry at President Emmanuel Macron for various reasons. Remaining members of France's Yellow Vest Movement, largely from political extremes, are also using the virus bill to try to rekindle its flame.

The movement started in 2018 as a broad uprising against perceived economic injustice and led to months of protests marked by violence between demonstrators and police, but subsided after the French government addressed many of the protesters' concerns.

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