Protesters against vaccine mandate in Belgium clash with police

Brussels, December 6 (RHC)-- Belgian police fired water cannon on Sunday to disperse protesters opposed to compulsory health measures against the coronavirus pandemic. Some 8,000 people marched through Brussels towards the headquarters of the European Union, chanting "Freedom!" and letting off fireworks.

The crowd was smaller than the 35,000 vaccine and lockdown sceptics who marched last month. Protesters were blocked from reaching the roundabout outside the EU headquarters by a barbed-wire barricade and a line of riot officers.

As two drones and a helicopter circled overhead, they threw fireworks and beer cans. Police responded with water cannon and tear gas.   The crowd dispersed into smaller groups around the European quarter

and there were more clashes and some set fire to barricades of rubbish.

Several European countries have seen demonstrations in recent weeks as governments respond to a surge in COVID cases with tighter restrictions. The organizers of Sunday's protests hoped to match the November 21 demonstration, during which police seemed caught off guard as the rally turned violent.

The demonstrators opposed compulsory health measures, such as masks, lockdowns and vaccine passes, and some share conspiracy theories. Banners on Sunday compared the stigmatisation of the non-vaccinated to the treatment of Jews forced to wear yellow stars in Nazi Germany.

"COVID = Organized Genocide," said one sign. "The QR code is a Swastika," declared another, referring to the EU COVID safe digital certificate.

"I can't bear discrimination in any form, and now there's the vaccine pass which is discriminatory, sanctions for [unvaccinated] carers which are discriminatory too, there's mandatory vaccination which is heading our way," one protester, martial arts teacher Alain Sienaort, was quoted as saying by the Reuters news agency. "That's all discrimination, so we have to fight it. We don't want a dictatorship."

Parents, some of whom brought small children to the protest, chanted their belief that the vaccine would make their toddlers sick. Off-duty firefighters in uniform, marched at the head of the protest as it wound its way through the city, to demand the right to refuse vaccination.

The measures imposed to fight COVID in Belgium were decided by the country's own national and regional governments, but the European Union has also attracted the sceptics' anger.

On Friday, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander de Croo announced a series of measures to tighten sanitary rules, bringing school Christmas holidays forward and asking children aged six and over to wear masks. Belgium, with a population of 11 million, has recorded an average of more than 17,800 daily infections with COVID-19 during the past seven days, as well as 44 deaths.

Approximately 800 people with severe forms of the disease are in intensive care in hospitals across the country, leading to overcrowding and the postponement of treatment for many other conditions.

Separately, police in Austria said some 40,000 gathered in capital Vienna on Saturday to denounce a lockdown set to come into force on Monday and compulsory vaccination starting in February. Protesters carried signs saying "No to Vaccine Mandates" or "Jesus Protects the Children, not Vaccines." Many ignored mask requirements.

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