



# Protests Force Temporary Closure of Hong Kong International Airport (HKG)



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## SUMMARY

Airlines canceled over 200 flights departing from Hong Kong International Airport on Monday, August 12 when thousands of protesters occupied the facility as part of an ongoing protest movement, now in its tenth week. This particular demonstration follows allegations of unnecessary police force that occurred on Sunday, August 11. In the evening, protesters dispersed due to rumors of impending police action. Hong Kong's Airport Authority resumed flights on Tuesday, August 13, but protests began anew in the afternoon, forcing the airport to close flights to check-in as of 4:30 PM. Reports of clashes between airport protesters and riot police have also started coming in since Tuesday night.

## ALLEGATIONS OF EXCESSIVE POLICE FORCE SPARK "EYE FOR AN EYE" PROTESTS

What began as a three-day sit-in scheduled to end on Sunday night quickly turned into a chaotic situation for airport officials, when thousands of protesters clad in black gathered at Hong Kong International Airport (HKG). The protest occurred in response to a situation where a woman was allegedly [hit in the eye](#) at close range by a bean bag round fired by police. Various [reports](#) indicated that the woman had lost her eye in the incident. This ignited "eye for an eye" demonstrations calling for protesters to assemble at the airport starting at 1:00 PM on Monday, August 12. By late afternoon, airlines were forced to cancel [224 outbound flights](#) due to the volume of protesters in the check-in area, and the inability of passengers to access facilities. Inbound flights were allowed to land. However, many carriers chose to turn their flights back to the port of origin or re-routed them. Hong Kong-based [Cathay Pacific airlines](#) advised travelers to postpone all non-essential travel through Hong Kong.



Figure 1: "Eye for an eye" graphics posted to Telegram urging protesters to demonstrate at Hong Kong International Airport.

The HKG protests were also part of a strike movement on Monday that crippled the city's transportation networks. Workers from a number of sectors participated, including more than [2,300 aviation workers](#).

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Major transportation disruptions were also noted throughout the day as protestors blocked subway lines and highways, including those leading to and from the airport.

Protests at HKG have caused significant travel disruptions throughout the region, as HKG is one of the busiest airports in the world. It currently services around 1,100 flights daily to approximately 200 destinations. According to [Airports Council International World](#), HKG served nearly 75 million passengers in 2018, and is the world's largest air cargo center.

### SECURITY IMPLICATIONS SHOULD PROTESTS CONTINUE

Organizers of the Hong Kong protests took to Telegram late Monday calling for continued demonstrations beginning at 1:00 PM on Tuesday, August 13. There was heightened police presence at the airport overnight, likely staging to disperse remaining and potential protestors. As of Tuesday night, there have been [reports](#) of physical clashes between protestors and riot police that have forced police to retreat. Continued protests in the coming days will significantly increase the likelihood for violent confrontation.



Figure 2: Graphics posted to Telegram on Monday, August 12<sup>th</sup> urging protestors to resume demonstrations at Hong Kong International Airport on Tuesday, August 13<sup>th</sup> at 1:00 PM.

Protests in urban Hong Kong escalated in the past week, sometimes with multiple protests taking place at the same time, and most significantly in areas not approved by the police. This situation led the State Department to increase the region's Travel Advisory to a [Level 2](#), encouraging travelers to exercise increased caution since the protests were no longer predictable. The protestors have shown a change in tactics by targeting critical infrastructure, garnering further international attention.

The return of protestors to the airport is likely a turning point; it is unlikely that the police will allow continued unauthorized protests there. Police are increasingly likely to violent tactics in an attempt to



control the area. Rhetoric has already shifted. Originally, authorities spoke of the demonstrations as riots, and claimed that protesters were agents of foreign influence. In an August 12 statement, Beijing claimed that the protests now showed early signs of terrorism. Such a rhetorical shift may preclude a physical shift in on-the-ground law enforcement tactics.

## CHINA'S RESPONSE

Media coverage has consistently focused on the idea of military intervention; authorities have produced several warnings to support that idea. Direct military intervention to suppress the opposition, however, does not seem a likely scenario, as several mitigating factors would constrain China's actions.

Hong Kong's economic strength is a major national security resource for China, and any overt use of force would be a major decision point, causing businesses and investors to consider leaving the region, or at least minimizing presence. Exports through Hong Kong are also a key method of easing the impact of U.S. tariffs. Finally, China is attempting to market the "one country, two systems" model to Taiwan ahead of their upcoming presidential election in January 2020. Any overt action would cause a loss in confidence among those who would otherwise consider the model a viable option.

Instead, it is likely Chinese authorities will further escalate rhetoric and increase use of direct warnings as intimidation tactics. If Chinese authorities were to intervene, it would likely be as a covert action, possibly backing up the Hong Kong security forces in high-threat areas like the airport. Intervention could also involve implementing stricter curfews and increased restrictions on internet use and other telecommunications, as well as public gatherings.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Escalation in protest tactics and the government's unwillingness to compromise signify that the protests will probably continue into the coming weeks with continued risk of violence. It is unlikely there will be a direct threat to businesses, but rather a continued threat to transportation and business continuity, and a collateral threat to personnel while commuting or continuing with their daily lives. Obviously, any actions taken at the airport or any other transportation hubs would necessarily affect local and visiting travelers alike.

Several upcoming dates could be flashpoints for violence. Among these are:

- August 31 – Anniversary of Beijing's decision to take control of Hong Kong's executive branch, which triggered the Occupy Central protests in 2014
- September 28 – Anniversary of the beginning of the Occupy Central protests in 2014
- October 1 – Chinese National Holiday.



## UPDATES AND SECURITY PRECAUTIONS

The U.S. Consulate General in Hong Kong has now issued [two alerts](#) urging travelers to monitor local media and the [Hong Kong International Airport website](#) for updates on the current situation. Travelers should avoid the areas of the demonstrations, use caution if they find themselves unexpectedly near large gatherings or protests, be aware of surroundings, and keep a low profile.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

For additional information about the ongoing protests in Hong Kong or other security issues around the region, contact OSAC's [Asia-Pacific Team](#).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[OSAC Report: US Private Sector Response to Protests in Hong Kong](#)

[OSAC Report: Taking Political Grievances to the Streets in Hong Kong](#)

[OSAC China Page](#)

[U.S. Consulate General Website](#)

[CNN: Is it safe to visit Hong Kong?](#)

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