

Hundreds arrested after British anti-cuts demo

AFP, London

British police clashed with bottle-throwing protesters at a London tourist landmark early Sunday, overshadowing a peaceful march by more than 250,000 people against government spending cuts.

At least 214 people were arrested and 84 people were hurt when a small group of "criminal" demonstrators broke free from Saturday's main rally, the biggest in the capital since protests against the Iraq war in 2003.

A group of several hundred masked rioters attacked the iconic Ritz Hotel, occupied a luxury food store, smashed up shops and banks and started a bonfire in historic Trafalgar Square before police finally contained them.

The original march called by unions on Saturday drew health workers, firefighters, teachers and their families, including children, to oppose the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's austerity measures.

"I think it's a game of two halves. Two hundred and fifty thousand people came to central London and protested peacefully," said Commander Bob Broadhurst of Scotland Yard, who led the police operation.

"But what we have had unfortunately is a group of criminals, nothing to do with that march, have decided to -- on their own steam -- attack buildings in central London and attack police officers," he told Sky News.

Several hundred black-clad protesters covering their faces with scarves hurled fireworks,



Activists start a fire at Oxford Circus during a Trade Union Congress march in London on Saturday. Hundreds of thousands of people from all over the United Kingdom took part in the march to protest against government cuts.

petrol bombs and paint at police, AFP reporters saw.

Clothes store Topshop and banks HSBC and Lloyds had their windows smashed, while some protesters hurled missiles at the five-star Ritz Hotel.

A group of protesters occupied luxury food store Fortnum and Mason and sprayed graffiti on the building until police sealed off the premises and

arrested those coming out.

Police said officers came under "sustained attack" at Trafalgar Square, site of the famous Nelson's Column and of four huge bronze lions. Rioters there were still throwing bottles at police into the early hours of Sunday.

Thirty-one police officers and 53 members of the public were injured in the violence,

police said. Sixteen members of the public and 11 police needed hospital treatment.

The 214 arrests were for public order offences, criminal damage, aggravated trespass and violent disorder, said police.

About 4,500 police officers were deployed for the protest after several British student rallies descended into chaos

last year, with one culminating in protesters damaging the car carrying heir-to-the-throne Prince Charles and his wife Camilla.

The violent end to Saturday's rally came after organisers the Trades Union Congress (TUC) said between 250,000 and 300,000 people had protested peacefully earlier.

Public sector workers, stu-

dents and pensioners waving signs which read "Don't Break Britain" and "No to Cuts" thronged the streets of the capital.

Many families with children were among the protesters and the air was filled with the low-pitched bellow of vuvuzela trumpets.

TUC chief Brendan Barber said he "bitterly regretted" the violence.

"I don't think the activities of a few hundred people should take the focus away from the hundreds of thousands of people who have sent a powerful message to the government today," he said.

The march started by the river Thames, passed the Houses of Parliament and Prime Minister David Cameron's Downing Street residence before ending in a rally in Hyde Park addressed by opposition Labour Party leader Ed Miliband.

"Our struggle is to fight to preserve, protect and defend the best of the services we cherish because they represent the best of the country we love," Miliband told the rally.

It was the largest protest in London since one million people marched against the Iraq war in February 2003.

After coming to power in May, the coalition announced cuts worth £81 billion (\$131 billion, 92 billion euros) over five years to slash a record public deficit it blames on the previous Labour government.

The cuts involve most government departments, with the loss of 300,000 public service jobs and pay freezes for civil servants.

Brown urges G-20 to seal 'global growth pact'

AP, Brussels

Less than a week ahead of a meeting of the Group of 20 rich and developing nations in China, former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown has urged the world's most powerful economies to seal a "global growth pact" to fight unemployment.

Brown was joined on Saturday by other top economic policymakers in his call for a transformation of the G-20 to help it remain relevant in a global economy torn by clashing national interests, although their focus differed somewhat from his.

To tackle high unemployment in poor and rich nations and a lack of economic growth in Europe and the United States, politicians need to look beyond merely reducing deficits, Brown said.

"All around the world deficit reduction has become the big issue when actually it's only one of the issues," Brown told a panel in Brussels debating the relevance of the G-20. The panel also included Pascal Lamy, the director general of the World Trade Organization, and World Bank President Robert Zoellick.

Brown said the G-20 was at a juncture that would decide whether it can deliver prosperity to poorer nations in the Middle East and North Africa as well as more established economies in

Truckers scarce as India aims for top gear growth

AFP, Mumbai

After three years of driving on some of the world's most dangerous roads, 20-year-old Indian truck driver Moin Sheikh wants out of the gruelling job.

He complains he is underpaid, overworked, harassed by police and frightened by the reckless driving on India's traffic-choked roads, which have the world's highest rate of fatalities.

"I want to leave. The police treat us like dirt and driving at night is dangerous," Moin, who gets just 3,000 rupees a month (\$65) from his private trucking company employer, told AFP at a Mumbai suburban truck halt.

He is not alone in disliking the job: India faces the worst shortage of truckers in the industry's history as drivers are put off by demanding work hours, low pay, high risks and lengthy stretches away from home and families, companies say.

"We face a 40 percent shortfall, which means we need three million more drivers," said R.K. Gulati, spokesman for the All India Motor Transport Congress, a transporters' lobby group.

"This is the worst manpower crisis the industry has faced," said Bal Malkit Singh, a city transporter and former head of the



Trucks stand parked as they wait to be loaded with goods on the outskirts of Mumbai.

Bombay Goods Transport Association.

Singh, who operates over 300 trucks across the country, says the shortage of drivers is so acute that 10 percent of his Bal Roadlines transport fleet stands idle at any point in time due to a lack of drivers.

Other transport operators report that as much as 15 percent of their fleet is out of service for the same reason.

One of the main problems is that the government has raised the educational

bar for truck drivers, requiring a minimum grade 10 education -- or high school to the age of 15 -- to carry hazardous goods.

Even for regular freight, a driver needs to have completed middle school to age 13, and young people with these qualifications are more keen to work in offices than spend long hours behind the wheel.

Truck drivers in India are also reluctant to stay in the job long, as the lack of a co-ordinated patrol network means they

face a high risk of being mugged on highways by gangs.

Moin says he has been robbed twice, losing his wallet and mobile phone.

All this comes as bad news for the Asian giant's rapidly expanding economy, which already faces transport bottlenecks because of dilapidated road networks and other hurdles.

India's two-million-mile (4.2 million kilometre) road network, the world's second largest after the United States, accounts for nearly 70 percent of the country's freight movement. The remaining 30 percent goes by rail.

"The driver shortage is having a wider impact on the economy" as goods pile up for transport, said Vishwas Udgirkar, senior India transport director at global consultancy Deloitte.

"It is making efficient logistics tough," Udgirkar said.

The trucker shortage is so bad that many fleet owners break the law requiring commercial vehicles to operate with two drivers so that one can take rest breaks from driving.

One solution for the company bosses would be to raise wages, but they say they are unable to because of cost pressures amid rising fuel and other commodity prices.

BP risks losing Russia 'deal of century'

AFP, Moscow

One of the biggest energy deals in Russia's post-Soviet history is on the verge of collapse amid questions about both the British giant BP's credibility and the risk of doing business in the country.

The British firm's \$16 billion alliance to jointly explore the Arctic with state-held Rosneft was hailed on its announcement January 15 as the "deal of the century" that would help resurrect Russia's dour business image abroad.

It marked a triumphant return for BP after the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill and a chance for Russia to roll back its reputation for coming up with bizarre pretexts for stripping energy majors of their prized possessions.

But few people watching Prime Minister Vladimir Putin assure BP chief Robert Dudley of the government's co-operation could have predicted that, 10 weeks later, an arbitration tribunal would block the tie-up.

The Stockholm panel decided to side with a small but powerful player in the Russian energy saga: a group of billionaires collectively known as AAR, who make up the Russian half of the British firm's TNK-BP venture.

The well-connected Russian businessmen had right of first refusal on the British firm's local deals. They feared that the BP-Rosneft agreement would eventually make their own company redundant.

Now sceptical voices in the media are wondering if BP simply walked into a trap laid for it by a Russian government keen to get sweeter terms on Arctic work -- which Rosneft can only get from a technically-savvy Western partner.

Pointing to the good relations between BP's Russian partners and the government, these commentators ask why they would have dared challenge Putin on something that seemed so dear to his heart.

Amid the drama and confusion of this high-stakes boardroom battle, two things appear certain: the deal as it now stands is ruined and BP's reputation in Russia is not much better off.

"BP's credibility has been undermined," said UniCredit equity analyst Artyom Konchin.

"To try and turn this kind of deal at this level without thinking of all the legal risks and expecting the problems to be resolved on their own is unprofessional," he added.

"They were hoping that the Russian shareholders would be convinced by the state. But that clearly did not happen," said the analyst.

BP has already vowed to try to complete the share-swap portion of the deal on its own. One source close to the company told the Financial Times that the ruling represented another step "in a non-linear, complex world".

Hong Kong banks to repay Lehman minibond investors

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong banks that sold minibonds linked to now bankrupt Lehman Brothers have agreed to repay tens of thousands of investors up to 96.5 percent of their investment, regulators said Sunday.

The sixteen banks will buy back a large chunk of the financial products at the centre of a major scandal in Hong Kong, after they were sold to more than 40,000 investors before their value tanked when the US bank went bankrupt in 2008.

Investors ploughed a total of HK\$15.7 billion (\$2 billion) of their savings into minibonds and other complex products backed by Lehman Brothers.

Welcoming the deal the Securities and Futures Commission (SFC) and Hong Kong Monetary Authority said the agreement "will provide substantial recoveries for all customers" holding the products.

"This outcome would have been seen as impossible in the months following the collapse of Lehman and demonstrates the value of good regulators responding efficiently and robustly when things go wrong," SFC chief executive Martin Wheatley said in a statement.



A woman begs for money at a central market in the Greek city of Thessaloniki on March 24. After last year's massive bailouts for Greece and then Ireland, Portugal slipped towards the brink at a time when Prime Minister Jose Socrates resigned after parliament blocked an austerity plan already agreed with eurozone partners.