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France

Angelique Chrisafis in Paris

@achrisafis Tue 28 Mar 2023 10:37 EDT



Hundreds of thousands of people take to French streets amid fears of violence

Minister says 13,000 police deployed as Macron vows not to waver on unpopular pensions policy



Protesters set fires on streets of Nantes over French pension changes - video report

Hundreds of thousands of people have taken part in street protests and strikes across France amid fears of violent clashes with police, as demonstrations continue over Emmanuel Macron's use of constitutional executive powers to push through an unpopular raise of the pension age.

The interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, said 13,000 police had been deployed, 5,500 of them in Paris alone. He said the record number was justified by "a major risk to public order".

The protest movement against raising the pension age from 62 to 64 is the biggest domestic crisis of Macron's second term, with the strikes on Tuesday affecting refineries, bin collections, rail transport, air travel and schools. Authorities in Paris and several other cities were braced for clashes between police and protesters.

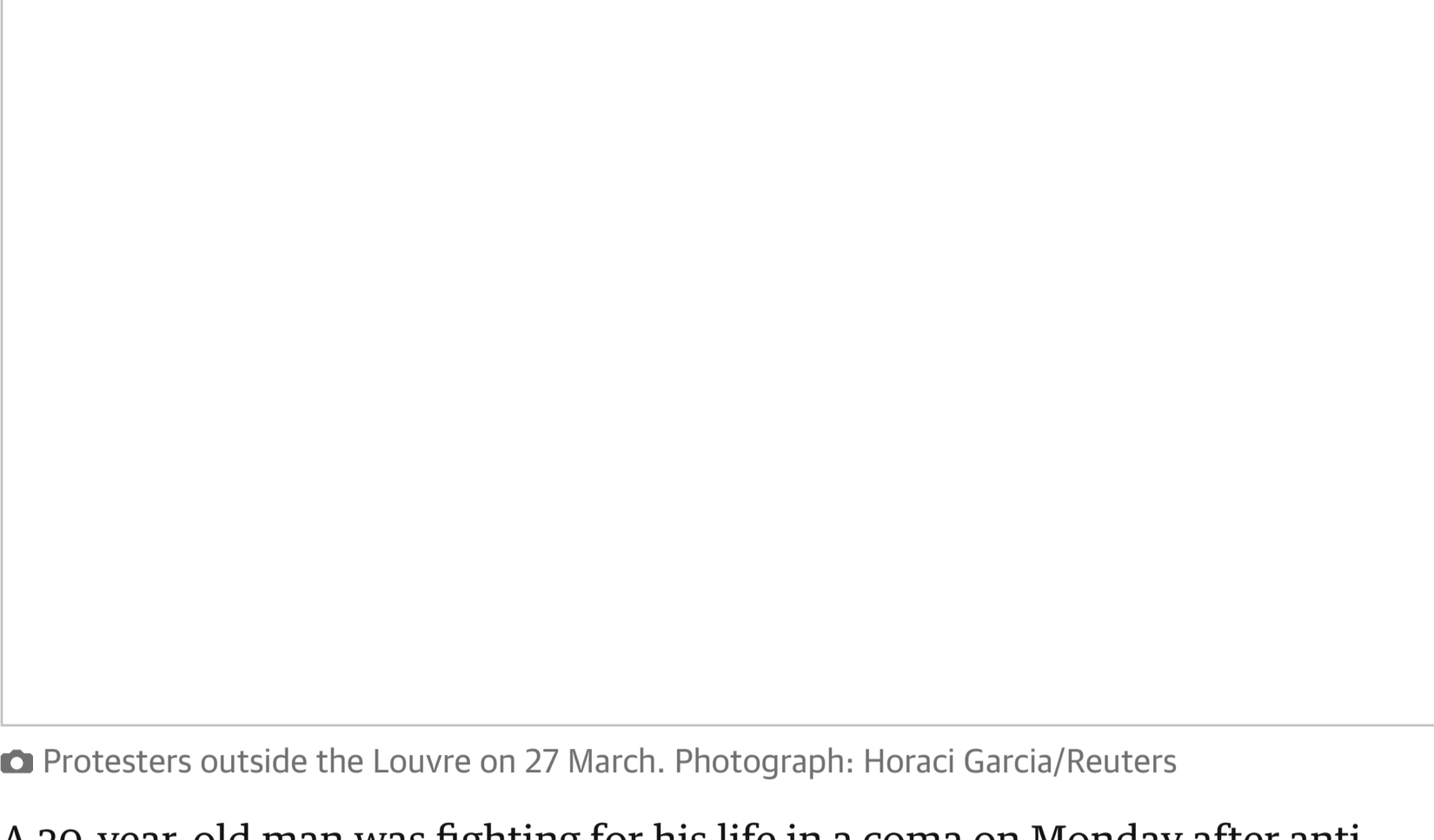
"The social state and the social safety net is disappearing," said Françoise, a social worker, who was due to retire in three months at 63, and was demonstrating in Paris.

Yves, a former teacher and factory worker, who retired at 59, said: "People are demonstrating on the street because citizens aren't being listened to. We're afraid of being teargassed but the police should be protecting us."

Inès, 25, from Seine Saint Denis, who had worked as a supermarket cashier and in fast-food chains, said: "This is about workers on the streets fighting for their rights."

The crisis has intensified because of controversy over policing tactics, with lawyers complaining of arbitrary arrests, injuries and heavy handedness during crowd control.

Protesters outside the Louvre on 27 March.



Protesters outside the Louvre on 27 March. Photograph: Horaci Garcia/Reuters

A 30-year-old man was fighting for his life in a coma on Monday after anti-government feeling spread in the west of France beyond the issue of pensions to environmental demonstrations, spurred by the impact of new water storage facilities for crop irrigation.

The man suffered head trauma during clashes between protesters and police. An investigation is under way to determine the circumstances.

The IGP, the internal affairs unit of the French police, said it had launched 17 investigations into incidents and allegations against police across France in recent weeks.

More than 30 lawyers wrote an open letter to Le Monde on Monday stating their "great concern" over what they called arbitrary arrests of hundreds of people, accusing the police of using the judicial system and arrests as a tactic to put people off protesting.

The head of Paris police has said all the arrests were justified.

Darmanin said many police officers had been injured during the protests.

The Council of Europe said on Friday that peaceful protesters and journalists had to be protected from police violence and arbitrary arrest.

What began as two months of regular, peaceful trade union-organised strike days has shifted to more impromptu protest gatherings over the past 10 days. There have been pockets of unrest in many cities and towns after dark, with fires lit on streets and property vandalised.

Attacks on politicians' constituency offices have increased since Macron's decision to push through the pensions changes, bypassing the lower-house of parliament.

A preparatory note by French intelligence services before Tuesday's trade union-led day of strike and protests said many more young people were likely to take part, perhaps twice or three times as many as on the last big day of strike action last Thursday, French media reported.

Protesters march during a rally in Paris, on 23 March 2023.



Protesters march during a rally in Paris on 23 March. Photograph: Christophe Ena/AP

According to the daily Le Parisien, the note said "the topic of repression and police violence ... could focus young people's anger".

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Many young people at first "didn't feel affected" by the pensions changes, but joined the movement last week, "indignant" at the use of executive powers contained in article 49.3 of the constitution to bypass parliament, after the government feared it would not get enough votes.

Authorities are expecting clashes and violence similar to last Thursday's coordinated strike day, when bus stops, newspaper kiosks and traffic lights were smashed in Paris and hundreds of fires lit on pavements amid running clashes with police.

Public buildings have been targeted, including Bordeaux city hall and a police station in Loriet. The interior ministry blamed "far-left" groups.

On Monday, the Louvre museum in Paris was blocked by striking museum workers and could not open.

Pickets continued at petrol depots and waste incinerators, particularly surrounding Paris, where 8,000 tonnes of rubbish were still piling up in streets across half of the city after weeks of bin strikes. Paris city hall said it would clear piles of refuse from the route of Tuesday's street march to try to avoid fires being lit.

France's civil aviation authority has told airlines at Orly airport in Paris, as well as at airports in Bordeaux, Marseille and Toulouse, to cancel 20% of flights for Tuesday and Wednesday. High school unions said that up to 200 schools were blockaded by pupils.

Macron summoned the prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, as well as government ministers and senior politicians for crisis meetings on Monday as tensions ran high.

The French president was supposed to have been hosting King Charles for a day of pomp and ceremony on Monday, but had to cancel the state visit because of the demonstrations. French opposition politicians on the left and right said France's image and diplomacy had been damaged by the last-minute cancellation.

"We have to find the right path ... we need to calm down," Borne told AFP, saying the government would not drop the pension changes. She said she was ready for dialogue with unions on other labour issues, including demanding jobs, conditions for older workers and retraining.

But Laurent Berger, the head of the moderate CFDT union, who has taken an unexpectedly hard line against the pension reform, said he would accept the offer of talks but only if the reform was first "put to one side".

The government has vowed to hold firm, uncertain of how many more days of strike action would be called. Berger said the prime minister must come up with a "very big move on pensions".

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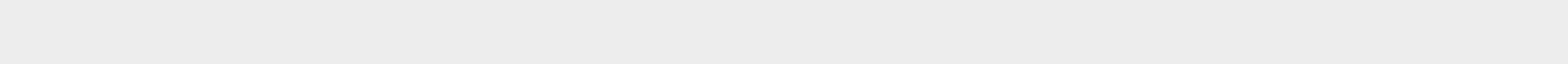
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