

China muffles calls for democracy protests

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China muffled calls for a pro-democracy movement on Sunday with a show of force from its security apparatus and an all-out propaganda offensive.

Huge numbers of uniformed and plainclothes police, combined with street-cleaning vehicles, made sure no crowds formed on Wangfujing, one of the busiest shopping streets in Beijing, where an anonymous online appeal has been calling on people to gather for weekly 'strolls' for democracy.

Shortly after 2pm, the time of the planned protest, security forces locked down several blocks and evacuated the entire area. Hundreds of tourists and Sunday shoppers were locked up inside the malls lining the pedestrian street. They were released a little later after squads of People's Armed Police, China's main anti-riot force, had marched through.

In Shanghai, several dozen uniformed and plainclothes police blasted whistles continually and jostled pedestrians and journalists to keep them from congregating outside the Peace Cinema at People's Square, the venue designated for the Shanghai protest. Several people were seen being bundled into a police van at one point, but it was not clear why they were picked up.

There was no sign of protest but many young people took pictures of the massive police presence. In Shanghai, several people quietly told journalists that they had come because of the online call.

Observers estimated the number of uniformed police present in the core area in Beijing at between 500 and 1000, and the number of plainclothes officers close to twice that number. Officers mostly showed restraint. But two foreign media photographers were manhandled and one cameraman beaten by plainclothes men.

Police had warned foreign journalists against reporting on the event, threatening some with consequences for their visas.

State media blanketed the nation over the internet, television and radio on Sunday morning with two hours of remarks by Wen Jiabao, the premier, in response to questions posted by internet users.

It was the third time Mr Wen held such a web chat, and it is not unusual ahead of the annual sessions of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the two organs through which the ruling Communist party demonstrates that it is taking bottom-up input for its policies.

But Mr Wen's latest web chat was announced abruptly late on Saturday and appeared to be timed to coincide with the planned protests.

Mr Wen said that China would set its target for average annual economic growth at 7 per cent in its next Five-Year Plan, down from 8 per cent for the past five years, and would not sacrifice social justice and environmental protection for rapid growth.

"The new target represents a tacit recognition that growth itself is not a panacea and creates its own set of problems including wasted resources, rising income disparities, social tensions and environmental damage," said Eswar Shanker Prasad, a professor for trade policy at Cornell University.

Mr Wen repeated pledges to rein in inflation and soaring property prices – two issues that have triggered widespread concern and dissatisfaction among Chinese citizens. "Rapid price rises have affected public and even social stability," he said.

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