

AUSTRALIA OFFERS SAFE HAVEN TO HONG KONGERS, SPARKING CHINA FURY

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PM Scott Morrison says his govt was suspending its extradition pact with the city and extending the visas of 10,000 Hong Kongers already in the country

SYDNEY : Australia offered pathways to permanent residency for thousands of people from Hong Kong on Thursday in response to China's crackdown on dissent, drawing a furious reply from [Beijing](#).

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said his government was suspending its extradition agreement with the city and, in addition to extending the visas of 10,000 Hong Kongers already in the country, threw open the door to thousands more wanting to start a new life Down Under.

Morrison said the decisions were taken in response to China's imposition last week of a tough new security law in Hong Kong, which he said "constitutes a fundamental change of circumstances" for the semi-autonomous territory.

"Australia is adjusting its laws, our sovereign laws, our sovereign immigration programme, things that we have responsibility for and jurisdiction over, to reflect the changes that we're seeing take place there," he said during a press conference.

China's embassy in Canberra shot back quickly, condemning the steps as "a serious violation of international law... and a gross interference in China's internal affairs".

"China strongly deplores and opposes the groundless accusations and measures" announced by Australia, it said.

"We urge the Australian side to immediately stop meddling in Hong Kong affairs," it said.

Foreign Minister Marise Payne said China's moves in Hong Kong were discussed earlier Thursday with Australia's so-called "Five Eyes" security partners -- New Zealand, the United States, Britain, and Canada.

Morrison's announcement came a day after China opened a new office in Hong Kong for its security agents to oversee implementation of the law targeting acts of subversion, secession, terrorism and foreign collusion.

The law, which followed sometimes-violent pro-democracy protests, is the most radical change in Hong Kong's freedoms since Britain handed the city back to China in 1997 under an agreement designed to preserve its way of life for 50 years.

China has bristled at widespread global criticism of the law and Australia's move to provide safe haven to some Hong Kong citizens was expected to worsen already rising tensions between the two.

Beijing in recent months has imposed tariffs on some Australian imports and impeded trade in other key commodities in response to Australian steps to counter Chinese interference in the

country.

China, Australia's biggest trade partner and a competitor for influence in the Pacific, was notably infuriated when Canberra led calls for a probe into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic.

New Zealand is also reviewing its relationship with Hong Kong because of the new law, Foreign Minister Winston Peters said, "including extradition arrangements, controls on exports of strategic goods, and travel advice".

Morrison brushed aside questions about whether the challenge over Hong Kong would likely lead to further Chinese retaliation.

"We will make decisions about what's in our interests, and we will make decisions about our laws and our advisories, and we will do that rationally and soberly and consistently," he said.

Under the new measures, 10,000 Hong Kong citizens and residents in Australia on student or temporary work visas will be allowed to remain in the country for an additional five years.

"If you're a temporary visa holder, your visa will be extended to an additional five years from today, in addition to the time you've already been in Australia, with a pathway to permanent residency at the end of that period," Morrison said.

The five-year visa and possible permanent residency were also offered to Hong Kong entrepreneurs or skilled workers who wish to relocate to Australia in the future.

"If there are businesses that wish to relocate to Australia, creating jobs, bringing investment, creating opportunities for Australia, then we will be very proactive in seeking to encourage that," he said.

The move echoed Australia's response to the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown when Canberra offered refuge to thousands of Chinese students and their families.

But it contrasts with the current conservative government's policy of restricting immigration.

Morrison said he did not expect a rush of new visa applications from Hong Kongers, in part due to coronavirus travel restrictions.

And he added that it would be "very disappointing" if China tried to prevent Hong Kong citizens from taking advantage of the offer.

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