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'Never seen anything like it': Mass looting grips Paris

Story by AFP • 7h • 2 min read



'Never seen anything like it': mass looting grips Paris
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Smashing shop windows and snatching boxes of goods, looters in Paris poured into stores across the capital on Saturday, facing no resistance from authorities as nationwide protests degenerated into violence.

Crowds of masked men wearing black hoodies yanked at metal store shutters until they gave way, clearing shelves of cigarettes, sunglasses, clothes, jewellery and food.



The violence erupted from demonstrations to denounce the cost of living
© Guillaume Saligot

The violence erupted as hundreds of thousands of demonstrators gathered across the country to denounce the cost of living, following weeks of student protests and stoking political uncertainty six months before France's presidential election.



Crowds of masked men wearing black roamed the streets, breaking shop windows and clearing shelves
© GEOFFROY VAN DER HASSELT

AFP journalists saw looters emerging from a supermarket carrying bags stuffed with cakes, fruit juice and alcohol.

From a small jewellery shop across the street, they took antique clocks. On a street corner, entire display racks of sunglasses vanished.

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Inside the shops, they searched for the cash register, smashing it onto the floor, sometimes only to discover it was empty.



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Perched on a pavement terrace with a colleague, a 38-year-old art teacher who gave her name as Alma said she had "never seen anything like it".

The pair, who had joined an unsuccessful march earlier in the day to reach the French president's residence, the Elysee Palace, said nonetheless that they "understand" the revolt.

The violence began on the sidelines of marches in the capital and other cities that the interior ministry said were attended by 550,000 people.

The CGT union, which took part, said 800,000 people participated.

Police used tear gas and water cannon against protesters who threw projectiles and aimed fireworks.

- 'Deep anger' -

French Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu, who slammed the "violence of extreme intensity", said late Saturday that 1,200 people had been arrested and 150 police officers hurt.

Paris mayor Emmanuel Gregoire said whole streets "have been devastated" in the capital, making a distinction between the "fundamental" right to protest and "unacceptable" violence.



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"I understand why people might be upset, but I think damaging property is fine, as long as we don't physically harm anyone," Alma said.

Restaurants, hotels and residential buildings have mostly been spared, prompting surreal scenes of Parisians enjoying their usual Saturday lunch with friends while crowds wreaked havoc outside.

Locals watched the scenes unfold from the safety of their apartments.

"What a sight," said Jules, a 29-year-old civil servant.

"They must have some pretty deep anger. They're a part of society who doesn't feel integrated."

While he agreed with the right to protest, he said the looters were "undermining their own goals".

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"Just look at the state of the street," he told AFP.

Near the iconic Place de la Republique in central Paris, broken glass and debris littered the roads, as a pile of burning bicycles belched out thick smoke.

Law enforcement was absent from the area, having clashed with protesters there earlier in the day.

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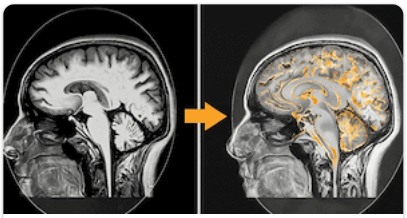
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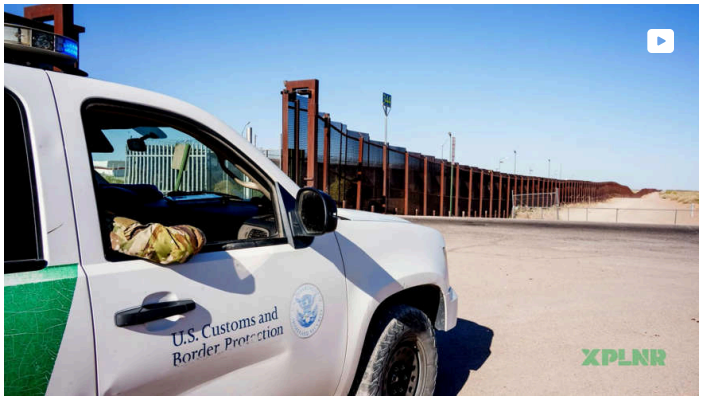
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