

WASHINGTON

Truckers protesting COVID mandates encircle Washington

By Madeleine Ngo, Adam Bednar and Esha Ray

Draped in American flags and fueled by anger over government pandemic policies, hundreds of vehicles led by a group of truckers encircled the nation's capital yesterday, hampering traffic outside the city for hours by driving at slower speeds.

The convoy of vehicles aimed to complete two loops on Interstate 495, a 64-mile highway known as the Capital Beltway, before returning to a staging area in Maryland, with plans to potentially ramp up the demonstration in the coming days. But by the second time around, the vehicles appeared to be so spread out that the congestion took on the feel of a weekday morning commute.

Although it was unclear whether the convoy, consisting overall of hundreds of vehicles, would ultimately enter Washington, D.C., organizers said they did not intend to drive into the capital yesterday out of fears that "bad actors" may turn it into a chaotic event reminiscent of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. They also wanted to avoid confrontation with police.

The main caravan of truckers, the People's Convoy, first departed from Adelanto, California, more than a week ago with plans to end their demonstration in the Washington area. For the past two days, the truckers have been rallying at a racetrack in nearby Hagerstown, Maryland, about 70 miles northwest of the capital, converging with other drivers and their supporters.

The People's Convoy was one of several groups inspired by the Canadian protests against pandemic measures that disrupted the capital of Ottawa, Ontario, for three weeks. The American groups said they, too, would drive to Washington to lead a nonpartisan, grassroots protest of government COVID policies, but many appeared to be aligned with far-right organizations and activists.

Their demands have been undercut by the reality that many U.S. states have already started rolling back restrictions as virus cases and deaths have ebbed. And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidance in late February suggesting that the vast majority of Americans could stop wearing masks. Many medical experts say vaccine mandates are effective in persuading more people to get their shots, which they say is essential to helping prevent the spread of the virus.

As the convoy made its way from the Hagerstown Speedway to the highway yesterday, a winding road that was approximately 5 miles was lined with people waving flags.