Thousands of poor expelled from Bangkok for APEC summit

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The massive security operation and wholesale expulsion of poor residents underway in Bangkok for the 21-nation Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit on 20-21 October provides another example of the gulf between the world's ruling elites and ordinary people.

Whenever leaders of the major powers meet anywhere in the world, police-state conditions are now imposed, ratcheting up the attacks on democratic rights in the name of security. Bangkok is being turned into a virtual fortress for the summit.

In preparation for the visit of government leaders, including US President George Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has ordered a social cleansing of the city. Some 10,000 beggars, homeless people, prostitutes and so-called illegal immigrants are being rounded up and forcibly moved. More than 20,000 troops and police have been mobilised for this sanitising operation.

On September 29, 621 illegal Cambodian migrants were bundled onto three Thai Air Force C-130 Hercules aircraft for a series of flights to Phnom Penh. Most were women and children who survived by selling flowers or begging in Bangkok's streets. Another 200 Laotians and Cambodians were deported by bus. Police colonel Watchara Sungwornyothin told the *China Post* that the hunt for unauthorised residents was continuing with 50 Cambodians being brought to immigration detention centres every day.

The expulsions drew a protest from Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, but not because of their brutal treatment. According to the *China Post*, Hun Sen "was upset at Thailand for publicising the deportations"—indicating that the two governments are cooperating in the operation. After the diplomatic protest, the Thai government banned journalists from the military airport where the flights were departing.

In an ominous move, given the violent history of the Thai security forces in dealing with demonstrations, Thaksin demanded that there be no protests during the APEC meeting. The *Bangkok Post* reported that the prime minister has ordered Interior Minister Muhamad Nor Matha to monitor civic groups "and make them understand that while such protests were not banned, they could damage Thailand's reputation".

After reports in the Singapore press criticising security at Bangkok International Airport, and vague police reports about surface-to-air missiles being smuggled into Thailand, the government announced further security measures. All vehicles entering the elevated Don Muang Tollway, which runs beside the airport, will be searched for weapons at the tollgates. During the summit, heavy vehicles and covered trucks will be banned from the highway.

A regime of security checks and body searches already exists at all venues connected with the APEC meeting, including the city's five-star hotels. Every hotel visitor is searched upon entry, handbags are opened and checked, and guards wave security wands over guests' luggage. Sub-contracted security personnel stop all vehicles, opening boots and checking underneath with rolling mirrors. The Conrad Hotel, near the US embassy, has posted heavily armed blue-suited police commandos and a Labrador sniffer dog at the front door.

Soldiers with automatic rifles, sniffer dogs and metal detectors are commonplace throughout the city, conducting body searches. Once the foreign delegations arrive, these measures will be escalated. Participating governments have been granted permission to fly in their own armed bodyguards.

The security operation has brought to light the

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activities of the previously unknown Counter Terrorism Intelligence Centre (CTIC), which is working closely with at least 20 US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the CTIC was established in early 2001 and brings together Thailand's three main security organisations, the National Intelligence Agency, the Special Branch of the Thai police and the military's Armed Forces Security Centre.

"Nowhere else in South-East Asia are US intelligence officials working as closely on the ground with a host government on matters of counterterrorism and intelligence," the newspaper reported recently. "Thai and US security agents shared facilities, equipment and information on a daily basis, officials familiar with the centre's operations said."

With an annual budget of some $US20 million, the centre relied on the CIA for its "structure, guidance and funding". This "top-secret counterterrorist operation ... marks a significant return to that kind of intimate regional security alliances forged by the US against communism at the height of the Vietnam War," the *Journal* commented.

Throughout the Vietnam War, from 1957 to 1973, Thailand was ruled by a US-backed military dictatorship. While Thailand hosted key bases for US air strikes on North Vietnam, the military brutally suppressed domestic opposition, in the name of the war on communism. After a brief period of civilian government, military rule was re-imposed in 1976 and lasted until 1992. These relations are now being resumed under the banner of the "war on terror".

Thaksin, a billionaire former police officer, obtained his start in business through monopoly rights and state contracts granted by former military regimes. He became one of the country's wealthiest individuals, controlling an extensive telecommunications empire, operating both in Thailand and internationally, conservatively estimated to be worth over $2 billion.

He and his Thai Rak Thai Party won the 2001 election campaign by exploiting the widespread public hostility to the impact of the IMF restructuring agenda being implemented by his predecessor Chuan Leekpai. He campaigned on a populist program that offered handouts to rural villages and debt relief to farmers while at the same time pledging to bail out failing Thai businesses.

Backed by Washington, his government is now reviving the security apparatus and authoritarian methods associated with military rule. The treatment being handed out to Bangkok's poorest residents in preparation for the APEC meeting is a warning of wider repression to come.

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