

Military menaces anti-government protesters in Thailand

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A tense standoff continues between heavily-armed troops and thousands of anti-government protesters in the Ratchaprasong commercial area of Bangkok. At least 1,500 soldiers were deployed in the early hours of Monday morning to the nearby Silom Road area, the capital's financial hub, to prevent a planned protest march.

Troops blocked streets, set up positions on overpasses, erected barbed wire entanglements and deployed sniper teams on high-rise buildings in a major show of force. United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) protest leaders called off the march on Monday and another planned on Tuesday, and called for reinforcements.

The UDD, which supports ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, draws the bulk of its support from poor rural areas in the north and northeast of the country. It has carried out continuous protests in Bangkok over the past five weeks to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, the dissolution of parliament and fresh national elections.

Abhisit has refused to stand down and declared a state of emergency earlier this month, covering the capital and surrounding areas. Street battles erupted on April 10 after troops attempted to clear a protest site near the Phan Fah bridge in central Bangkok. At least 25 people were killed, including 5 soldiers, and more than 850 injured in the fierce clashes before troops pulled back and were withdrawn to their barracks.

Last Friday, Abhisit signalled a tough stance by installing army commander General Anupong Paochinda as head of the Centre for Public

Administration in Emergency Situations, replacing Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban. Abhisit also set the stage for a bloody crackdown by blaming "terrorists" for the April 10 violence, effectively giving the green light to shoot protesters who in any way resisted the military.

In a TV interview on Monday, Abhisit stressed that the government would end the protests and take control of the Ratchaprasong area, but declined to set a timetable. "I would not put pressure against the responsible authorities, and at the same time, I would not let my country move into anarchy and become a land without laws," he said. Yesterday, the prime minister mooted the possibility of declaring martial law.

Military spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkamnerd yesterday warned that troops would use live ammunition against protesters. "We can no longer use soft to hard steps. We have to keep a distance between troops and demonstrators. If they try to break the line, we will start using tear gas, and if they do break the line, we need to use weapons to deal with them decisively," he said.

Sansern said the guidelines for suppressing protests had been altered because "terrorists" were "preparing to use weapons such as throw type bombs, sharpened sticks and sticks tied with nails, as well as acid". The government backed by the media has been circulating unsubstantiated allegations for the past week that shadowy gunmen had opened fire on troops on April 10, provoking the violent clashes. The UDD has denied the claims.

The troops mobilised in the Silom Road area have been carefully selected. A meeting of armed forces commanders on Saturday agreed to the deployment of Special Forces units from all three armed forces into the capital.

Despite their militant demagogic, UDD leaders have back-pedalled since the April 10 confrontation, pulling back from the protest site at the Phan Fah bridge in the name of consolidating in the Ratchaprasong commercial area. UDD leader Nattawut Saikua declared yesterday that protesters were going to fortify the rally site, and “we go out to wage a big war”. At the same time, he held out the prospect of “negotiations to end the confrontation and chaos”—reversing previous statements that all talks were at an end.

From the outset, the UDD has sought to exploit the frustration and outrage of the rural poor over the way Thaksin was ousted by the military in 2006, and then pro-Thaksin governments were removed by court rulings over alleged corruption in 2008. At the same time, Thaksin and the UDD have attempted to keep the demonstrations on a tight rein, fearing that the protesters would begin to voice their own class demands. The UDD’s back down since April 10 has only encouraged the government and military to take a tougher approach.

For the past four years, the billionaire magnate Thaksin has been engaged in a fierce factional fight within the ruling class over economic policy and the spoils of office. The traditional elites—the military, the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—who backed his election in 2001, turned on Thaksin as he encouraged foreign investment and concentrated power in his hands, cutting across their vested interests. For all his claims to be fighting for democracy, Thaksin was just as autocratic as his factional opponents while in office.

Both the pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling elite are fearful of triggering widespread social and political unrest. The Thai economy began to grow again at the end of last year after being hit hard by the global economic crisis. However, while company profits and share prices were buoyed, social inequality continued to deepen. In the rural areas, small farmers, traders and the

unemployed looked to Thaksin, who during his first term of office gave limited handouts as part of his government’s stimulus measures.

As the latest demonstrations in Bangkok have worn on, the class issues have begun to emerge. While the UDD leaders have confined their demands to the call for immediate elections, protesters have expressed their hostility to the country’s wealthy elites. The protests have begun to attract workers and sections of the urban poor, who also face greater economic hardships as a result of the economic crisis.

An article in Monday’s *New York Times* entitled, “Whiff of rebellion spreads in Thai hinterland,” reported from the economically depressed Isaan region in the northeast where about a third of the Thai population lives. After noting that Thaksin’s money and patronage network remained important in the protests, it stated that “the movement also appears to be taking on a more grass-roots character, with farmers and villagers finding common cause and expressing a new assertiveness and self-awareness”.

Thousands took part in a funeral held on Saturday near Khon Kaen, in the northeast, for one of the protesters killed in the April 10 clashes in Bangkok. Nearly \$US10,000 was raised in donations to help the widow. Nearly all in attendance wore the red of the UDD, rather than traditional black. In another telling recent incident, a thousand people turned up in pickup trucks to defend a local pro-UDD radio station when rumours spread that troops had been dispatched from Bangkok to shut it down.

As the army tightens its noose around UDD protesters in Bangkok, the government and the military chiefs are undoubtedly planning wider repression if a crackdown provokes unrest in the UDD’s rural strongholds.



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