

Thai military escalates crackdown

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17 May 2010

The Thai military is poised to move against thousands of anti-government protesters encamped in Bangkok's Ratchaprasong commercial district in what is likely to be a bloody encounter. On the government's orders, food, water, electricity and mobile phone communications have been cut off to the protest site. The army has declared two areas of the capital to be "live fire zones".

Already at least 31 people have been killed and 230 injured in the past four days of street fighting as the army has tightened its grip. All of the dead are protesters, pointing to the unequal character of the clashes. "Red shirt" demonstrators armed with slingshots, petrol bombs, steel pipes and fireworks, operating from behind makeshift barricades, are confronting heavily armed troops backed by armoured vehicles.

The *New York Times* on Saturday reported that an emergency medical technician was one of the victims of the fighting. It stated that a photographer had seen two dead or wounded victims lying unattended for a long period. The army would not allow an ambulance to pass a roadblock, so rescue workers had to risk their lives by crouching and running with stretchers to carry out the victims.

While Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and military spokesmen claim that the army is only firing in self-defence, it is increasingly apparent that troops, including trained snipers, are deliberately firing live rounds at protesters. Last Thursday former army general Khattiya Sawasdiphol, who styled himself as a security adviser to the protesters, was critically wounded by a shot to the head while speaking to reporters.

The shooting of Khattiya inflamed tensions after the collapse of a compromise deal between the government and the opposition United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) the previous day. Abhisit withdrew his offer to hold early national elections in November after UDD leaders made additional demands and the protests continued.

In a televised address on Saturday, Abhisit justified the killings, declaring: "We cannot allow unlawful elements to take Bangkok hostage... There is no turning back in our efforts to maintain a legal state. Losses will have to be endured. It is the way to righteousness." He said military intervention was the only way to end the protest, and troops would "push forward," but gave no deadline.

UDD leader Nattawatt Saikua yesterday called for the military to pull back and for UN-moderated talks with the government to avoid further loss of life. However, the government immediately rejected the offer. Abhisit's secretary Korbsak Sabhavasu told the media: "If they really want to talk, they should not set conditions like asking us to withdraw troops." In his regular Sunday TV address, Abhisit declared: "We cannot retreat now". He again repeated unsubstantiated claims that "terrorists" are among the protests—a threadbare pretext for a crackdown.

Around 5,000 protesters, including about 1,000 women and children, are now hemmed in on all sides. Today and tomorrow have been declared public holidays. All schools in Bangkok have been shut down for a week. Plans were announced for a curfew in sections of Bangkok from last night but were cancelled. The government has called for women and children to leave the protest camp by this afternoon.

Prime Minister Abhisit now appears determined to strike whatever the cost in lives. A previous attempt on April 10 by the military to clear a protest site near the Phan Fah Bridge in central Bangkok resulted in fierce street battles that killed 25 people, including 5 soldiers, and injured more than 850. Until now, the government and military have been concerned that any renewed offensive would provoke more widespread unrest in Bangkok and other areas of the country.

The UDD, which supports former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, draws much of its support from the impoverished, rural north and northeast of the country. Thaksin, a billionaire telecom tycoon, came to power in 2001 promising to defend Thai businesses and help the poor in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. As part of his economic stimulus measures, he provided a series of limited handouts—financial grants to villages, cheap loans and a low-cost health scheme.

The traditional Thai elites—the military, the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—initially backed Thaksin but turned on him when he continued the previous open-market policies and concentrated power in his hands, undermining established patronage networks. The army, with the backing of the monarchy, ousted Thaksin in 2006, but when fresh elections were held in late 2007, the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) won. After months of protests by the anti-Thaksin Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and two court rulings removing PPP prime ministers, Abhisit was installed with the help of the military in December 2008.

Four years of bitter factional wrangling in the Thai political establishment are now intersecting with deepening class tensions fuelled by the global economic crisis. The UDD protesters, who have conducted two months of continuous demonstrations to demand early elections, have also started to raise their own concerns about widespread poverty, unemployment and the gulf between rich and poor. Their determination has proven an obstacle to UDD leaders who were more than willing last week to agree to Abhisit's compromise.

All sections of the bourgeoisie, including those represented by the UDD, are terrified at the prospect of a broader social movement of workers and the poor. Already the UDD protesters have been joined by sections of the city's urban poor, who also clashed with security forces last weekend.

In preparation for a military crackdown, Abhisit last week extended the existing state of emergency in Bangkok to 15 provinces in the north and northeast that are regarded as UDD strongholds. Yesterday five more provinces were placed under the emergency decree.

Despite the emergency measures, UDD supporters in the north and northeast organised protests and clashed with security forces. In Ubon Ratchathani province, protesters burned tyres on several roads and a group tried to enter a military compound but was driven back when troops fired into the air. ABC News reported that a military bus was burned in the northern city of Chiang Mai and protesters gathered in the northeastern towns of Nongkhai and Udon Thani.

The US and other major powers, which backed last week's compromise agreement, are fearful that the continuing upheaval in Thailand will trigger social unrest in other regional countries. Warnings have been made of the dangers of a wider civil war in Thailand. Reuters cited Singapore-based academic Federico Ferrara as saying: "The potential for a broader civil conflict is high. It is conceivable they might have an even worse problem on their hands after they have 'cleansed' Bangkok of the red shirts—especially if they have to massacre hundreds of people in the process."

That, however, is exactly what the Abhisit government is preparing to do.



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