Heavy military presence continues in Bangkok

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The Thai government yesterday extended the curfew in Bangkok and a third of the country's provinces after troops backed by armoured vehicles cracked down on United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) protesters in the capital's Ratchaprasong commercial district on Wednesday.

Wednesday's death toll has now risen to at least 15 and 399 wounded. The vast majority were protesters. The soldiers, who had clearly been ordered to crush any resistance, fired indiscriminately as they advanced into the protest area. Most of the protesters were unarmed. Some had makeshift weapons—slingshots, petrol bombs and fireworks—that were no match for automatic weapons.

After the protest leaders surrendered to the military, at least 1,000 protesters fled to a nearby Buddhist temple for sanctuary. That compound then came under fire, resulting in further casualties. Journalist Andrew Buncombe from the British-based *Independent* was inside the temple with the protesters and was wounded along with others.

"Of those killed yesterday, several died directly outside the temple—and many, many more wounded," Buncombe wrote. "Those sheltering inside the temple were just as vulnerable. In one of the compound's buildings, seven bodies were laid out on the floor." He reported: "A photographer said he saw a man shot in front of him as he ran away from a line of soldiers, two bullets hitting him in the back and apparently exiting from the chest."

Buncombe commented on the temple shootings: "Precisely which positions the firing was coming from was unclear. Was it coming from snipers or from the regular troops? It seems almost certain it was coming from the troops. And who within the chain of command was ordering troops to fire so recklessly, so close to so many people, the vast overwhelming majority of whom were unarmed, unthreatening?" Unable to move overnight because of the curfew, it was only yesterday that the wounded were evacuated from the temple and the protesters allowed to leave.

A heavy military presence continued throughout the area yesterday. Angry groups of protesters fleeing from the protest site had lashed out at the symbols of the wealth and power of the Bangkok elites—setting fire to nearly 40 buildings, including the stock exchange and the glamorous CentreWorld shopping mall. The military ordered soldiers to shoot looters and arsonists on sight. The *New York Times* reported that a loudspeaker on a military vehicle near the protest site blared out: "Terrorists are still at work! Please leave the area."

The military and the government fear further unrest in Bangkok, and the north and northeast of the country where many of the UDD demonstrators come from. Government buildings were attacked in at least four regional centres on Wednesday. Army spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkamnerd claimed yesterday that there were 13,000 people in the provinces under curfew "actively waiting to riot and perpetrate illegal acts".

Sansern denounced the turmoil in Bangkok as the work of "organised crime" and "terrorism" and alleged that security forces had uncovered explosives and assault rifles. Such vilification of the UDD or "red shirt" protesters is simply a crude justification for the government's own crimes. The death toll in clashes between security forces and protesters over the past week is at least 53. Another 25 died on April 10 during a previous military crackdown. Overwhelmingly, the casualties have been protesters.

The pro-government propaganda reflects the class contempt of the Thai ruling elites for the urban and rural poor who made up the bulk of the demonstrations. The UDD, which is aligned to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, began the protests in mid-March to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and early

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elections. But as the demonstrations have worn on, the hostility of the protesters to the wealthy Bangkok establishment has become more evident.

Washington's response to Wednesday's military crackdown reflected the same contempt for the protesters. While deploring violence and loss of life in general, US State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid reserved his strongest words for those engaged in arson. "We condemn such behavior and call on UDD leaders and affiliated opposition politicians to urge their supporters to stop such acts," he said. The Obama administration has issued no such condemnation of the Thai government and military for gunning down protesters over the past month.

There is no shortage of voices in the Thai and international media now calling for compromise and reason to prevail. A number of commentators recognise that profound class divisions have opened up in Thai society under conditions where all of the country's institutions, including the monarchy, the military, the courts and parliament, are discredited in the eyes of broad layers of the population. The more perceptive are fearful that the protest movement is slipping out of the control of the UDD leaders, who were prepared to compromise with Abhisit.

An article, entitled "A polity imploding," in the British-based *Economist* noted that it was not just the Abhisit government that was disbelieved. "By far the greatest distrust, and the hardest to overcome, is that felt by a sizable number of Thais, inside and outside the red shirts, towards the country's royalist elite and its political, military and business allies. This grouping blithely tossed Mr Thaksin out when he got too big for his boots. That he was thuggish and greedy was a handy excuse. But the 2006 coup failed to bury him politically and only unleashed a wider backlash against an elite that still believes in a divine hierarchy of which they are the agents. Mr Abhisit would object to such a description, but his class betrays little sympathy or interest in the aspirations of rural and working-class voters."

The article concluded with a hopeful list of compromises to sort out the "crooked procedures" that began with the 2006 army coup that ousted Thaksin. These included reforms to the constitution imposed by the military junta and lifting the bans on politicians from pro-Thaksin parties. But the writer concluded that Abhisit's failure to make these changes and achieve "peaceful reconciliation" was "lamentable" and was "only harder now".

The UDD leadership is just as terrified of the movement of the urban and rural poor that the protests have unleashed. The telecom billionaire Thaksin initiated the protests as a means of pressuring his factional rivals in the Thai elite for concessions. But Thaksin and his supporters in the UDD leadership are incapable of addressing the social issues now being raised by the protesters.

UDD leader Veera Musikapong issued a rather desperate appeal for calm yesterday after being taken into custody. "I'd like to ask all sides to calm down and talk with each other in a peaceful manner," he told reporters. "Please dissolve your anger. We cannot create democracy with anger."

There is no indication, however, apart from pious words, that the Abhisit government has any intention of compromising. Eight UDD leaders are under military detention after surrendering to the security forces—five on Wednesday and another three yesterday. At least nine UDD leaders, including some of those detained, have warrants against them on charges of terrorism, which is punishable by the death penalty. Other charges include violation of the emergency laws.

Even if Abhisit makes concessions, he and his backers are now deeply despised in broad layers of the Thai population. No Thai political party had a longer association with parliamentary rule than Abhisit's Democrat Party. In 1992, the Democrats were in the forefront of the pro-democracy protests against the military junta that ended with a bloody massacre that killed scores of demonstrators. Now the party is seen as the military's ally in trampling over democratic rights.

While the military may now control the streets of Bangkok, none of the class issues that have erupted to the surface has been resolved. As the global economic crisis worsens and compounds the economic and political turmoil in Thailand, the demands of working people will emerge again—in all likelihood, sooner rather than later.

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