

Thailand: Five dead in latest attacks on anti-government protests

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26 February 2014

Five people, including four children, were killed in attacks on anti-government protesters in Thailand last weekend.

On Saturday, a five-year-old girl was shot dead and another girl was fatally injured in a grenade explosion in Trat province, while more than 30 other people were injured. On Sunday, two children were killed in a grenade attack at a rally site near Bangkok's Central World shopping mall. Twenty-one other people were injured. Those killed were not involved in the protests.

No one has been arrested for the attacks, which bring the total number of people killed since protests began last November to 21. A further 720 have been wounded in clashes between pro- and anti-government groups and security forces, as well as attacks by unidentified gunmen.

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra described the weekend's violence as "terrorist acts for political gains" and ordered "a full investigation by authorities." On Monday, she again urged the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) to negotiate with her to end the protracted political crisis.

Speaking to protesters at the Silom rally site yesterday, PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban rejected Yingluck's appeal for talks and repeated his demand for the Puea Thai Party government to resign. He blamed the attacks on Yingluck, declaring: "There's nowhere else in the world where national leaders order their minions to murder children so that they can cling to power."

While the killers' identities are not known, the PDRC had more to gain by staging the attacks. For more than three months it has sought to generate chaos in the capital by blockading intersections and government buildings in order to create the conditions for a military coup. The PDRC, supported by the opposition

Democrat Party, calls for the government to be replaced by an unelected "people's council," which would be nothing other than a front for the military.

The PDRC disrupted the February 2 national elections by shutting down 11 percent of the country's polling stations and preventing millions of people from voting. The Democrats, who have not won an election since 1992, boycotted the poll and have taken legal action to annul the result.

The PDRC and Democrats represent Thailand's traditional elites, including the monarchy, the armed forces and sections of the state bureaucracy, who bitterly oppose Yingluck and her brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in 2006 after he alienated the Bangkok elites by further opening the economy to foreign investment and passing limited reforms, such as cheap healthcare.

The opposition's "people's council," if established, would abolish such reforms, including Yingluck's rice subsidies for farmers, which the PDRC denounces as "vote buying." This would fuel widespread anger among the millions of rural and urban poor who make up the base of support for the Puea Thai Party.

Speaking to Agence France-Presse yesterday, Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha warned that "there will be civil war if all sides do not respect rules."

Prayuth has repeatedly stated that he is "neutral" in the current stand-off. But the military, which installed the last Democrat government and ruthlessly suppressed pro-Thaksin "Red Shirt" protesters in 2010, clearly sympathises with the PDRC. In December, Prayuth told reporters: "The military does not shut or open the door to a coup, but a decision depends on the situation."

On Monday, Prayuth delivered a rare television

address, in which he called for dialogue between the government and opposition. He stated that the military “doesn’t want to use force and weapons to fight against fellow Thai people,” but added that troops were “ready to do their duty” if necessary and that if they intervened, “laws and the constitution will have to be nullified.”

Prayuth stated—without providing a shred of evidence—that those behind the recent bombings were linked to violent attacks carried out during the 2010 Red Shirt protests in Bangkok. The then-Democrat government claimed that a group of black-clad gunmen allegedly allied with the Red Shirts fired on soldiers. This was used as a pretext for the army’s crackdown, which killed 90 people and wounded thousands.

The Yingluck government has been in caretaker mode with limited powers since announcing the February 2 elections in December. Its position is highly unstable, with much of the state apparatus supporting the PDRC. This includes the Electoral Commission, which has refused to hold make-up rounds of voting until late April, and has refused to register candidates for 28 constituencies where the PDRC protests prevented registration.

The courts have handed down a series of favourable decisions for the opposition. On Monday, the Criminal Court rejected the Department of Special Investigation’s request for warrants to arrest 13 PDRC leaders. The court cited last week’s ruling by the Civil Court which banned the government from using force to break up protests.

The Criminal Court will rule tomorrow on a request by the PDRC to scrap warrants previously issued for PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban and 18 other protest leaders.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission has summoned Yingluck to appear before a hearing tomorrow on trumped up charges that she failed to stop alleged corruption linked to the government’s rice buying scheme. If she is found guilty she could be banned from politics.

The ongoing political impasse is exacerbating the country’s economic downturn. Figures released on Tuesday showed that imports fell 15.5 percent in January from a year earlier—the biggest drop in four years—while exports dropped by 2 percent. On Tuesday, Chinese car company Great Wall Motor postponed

plans to build a \$300 million sports utility vehicle plant in Thailand because of the unrest. Last month, Toyota said it may reconsider investing \$609 million to increase its production in the country if the crisis drags on.

The government and opposition, despite their bitter animosity, agree that the economic crisis must be imposed on working people and the rural poor, through the scrapping of subsidies and other austerity measures. While some sections of big business would back a military coup to end the political deadlock and enforce this agenda, others have warned that this could trigger widespread unrest. The *Bangkok Post*’s editorial yesterday stated nervously: “Any so-called victory by Mr Suthep will be quickly challenged by an opposing group. The red shirts already have promised that.”



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