



A column of tanks guard a highway in suburban Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's ruling generals imposed tough new curbs on the media including a ban on expressions of public opinion as they tightened their grip on power two days after a bloodless coup.

'Thai coup undermines Asean democracy march'

AFP, Singapore
Thailand's return to military rule is a setback for democracy in Southeast Asia after two decades of progress that brought an end to army-backed regimes in Indonesia and the Philippines, observers say.
Any sudden change of government in any Asean member government is no good for Asean as a whole," said Ong Keng Yong, the secretary general of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).
The Secretary General hopes the situation in Thailand will return to normal as soon as possible, because political stability in Thailand is very important to the stability of Asean.
Analysts said the coup's impact would depend on how long the military holds onto power after ousting the billionaire-businessman prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, in a bloodless putsch Tuesday.
Mely Caballero-Anthony, a Southeast Asia specialist at the Singapore-based Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, said the events in Thailand were a setback for the region.
If you look at what's happening in Asean, one of the goals is to establish a more democratic Southeast Asia," she said.
Anything that is considered as an unconstitutional takeover of power is a setback to democratisation. That is bad news for Southeast Asia," she told AFP.

Ahmadinejad spars with US policy heavyweights

REUTERS, New York
After railing against US global dominance at the United Nations this week, hard-line Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad appeared with some of his most prominent American critics to debate issues including his views on the Holocaust and Iran's nuclear programme.
A 90-minute closed event hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations on Wednesday night represented the highest-level recent attempt at an informal Iranian-American dialogue, even as the two governments exchange heated rhetoric over nuclear weapons, terrorism and Middle East security.
My sense was that, in principle, he (Ahmadinejad) was open to a relationship (with the United States) but that he wanted the United States to take the initiative to bring it about," Richard Haass, council president, told Reuters.
Ahmadinejad, who took office in 2005, avoided speech-making and "seemed to enjoy the give-and-take" of intellectually sparring with the group of 19 council members on a broad range of issues, Haass said.
A lot of the significance of the meeting is the fact that it happened," he said.
Questions posed to Ahmadinejad included why he persists in describing the Holocaust as a myth, why Tehran insists on enriching uranium when it could have access to nuclear power without doing so, and why some Iranian newspapers have been closed. He appeared to break little new ground.

Quartet backs Abbas for Palestinian unity govt

5 Palestinians killed in Gaza strikes

AFP, United Nations/ Gaza City
Major powers involved in Middle East peace efforts voiced their strong support Wednesday for a bid by moderate Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas to form a government with Hamas, even though the radical Islamic group still refuses to recognise Israel's right to exist.
The so-called Quartet grouping of the United States, European Union, Russia and United Nations also announced an agreement to extend for three months temporary emergency aid for the Palestinian territories, which are now ruled by a Hamas-led administration.
A statement issued following a meeting of Quartet foreign ministers here Wednesday appeared to mark a softening of Washington's tough stance on Hamas, which it considers a terrorist organisation.
US President George W Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who both support Abbas and met with him in New York this week, have voiced deep scepticism about the formation of a government joining his Fatah Party and Hamas.
But Rice still signed on to the Quartet statement that specifically "welcomed the efforts of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to form a government of national unity" with the Islamic militants.
The statement went on to say that the backing for the Abbas's plan was based on the hope that the new government's platform would "reflect" Quartet demands that Hamas renounce violence, recognise Israel and comply with previous Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements.
Meanwhile, five Palestinians, including a woman, were killed and several wounded by Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip on Thursday, as an ongoing military operation edged towards its third month.
Israel says its assault in Gaza, where more than 200 Palestinians have been killed since late June, is aimed at securing the release of a soldier snatched by militants nearly three months ago, and stopping rocket attacks.

Ex-Thai govt high-ups flee after many held

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok
Thai Rak Thai executives and close aides of ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra have scattered abroad while others still in the country have been taken into custody or have gone into hiding upcountry, sources said yesterday.
Party deputy spokesman Jatuporn Promphan said no executives visited the party's headquarters yesterday because of the new ban on assembling in groups of more than five people.
Meanwhile, Thai Rak Thai Party executive board member Veera Musikapong said he and some party members will seek permission from the Administrative Reform Council (ARC) leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin to visit former deputy prime minister Chidchai Vanasatidya, who is being detained at the Army Command.
A senior party member said some key members had left on unscheduled trips abroad before the coup. Former agriculture minister Sudarat Keyuraphan has gone to Paris with her family and is still there, while former interior minister Kongsak Wantana was heading for Germany.
A Commerce Ministry source said former deputy prime minister and commerce minister Somkid Jatusripitak had reportedly changed his return from France to Singapore, instead of Bangkok, as first planned.
Former finance minister Thanong Bidaya was attending the annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in Singapore, which ended yesterday.
Rumours spread about a cabinet in exile forming in Singapore when many ex-ministers were reported to be "regrouping" there.

UN terms Iraq deadlier Italian troops pull out

REUTERS, Baghdad
Italian forces ended their mission in Iraq yesterday, handing over the southern province they patrol to Iraqis, while the United Nations said the country has become deadlier than ever.
The force of 1,600 Italians will all be home within eight weeks, having turned over their base to Iraqis, British military spokesman Major Charlie Burbridge said. The Italians have been under British command in Iraq's mainly Shia southern sector.
The Italians have been very successful here. The key to their success has been developing a good working relationship with the local governor and Iraqi authorities, making it possible to turn over security responsibility to Iraqi forces," Burbridge said. The province also includes a giant US air base which will not be turned over, near ruins of the ancient city of Ur. A task force of 450 Australians will stay on that base as a rapid reaction team in case of a security emergency in the province.



The space US Shuttle Atlantis is surrounded by land support personnel after landing early yesterday at the Kennedy Space Centre, Florida. Atlantis is carrying a six person crew returning from a mission to the International Space Station.

Atlantis lands safely

AFP, Cape Canaveral, Florida
Space shuttle Atlantis made a pre-dawn landing here yesterday after a successful 12-day construction mission to the orbiting International Space Station.
The shuttle touched down at Kennedy Space Centre at 6:21 am (10:21 GMT), in the space shuttle programme's 15th nighttime landing in Florida.
Welcome back, Congratulations on return," Nasa communications officer Tony Antonelli told the Atlantis crew as they ground to a halt on the runway.
It's nice to be back," answered Atlantis Commander Brent Jett, who piloted the third shuttle mission since the 2003 Columbia disaster that killed seven astronauts.
The shuttle's landing was delayed by 24 hours after several small, unidentified objects were discovered orbiting along with Atlantis. On closer inspection Wednesday, the objects were deemed to be objects lost by the shuttle during its manoeuvres.

'I am a jobless man,' says Thaksin

AP, Bangkok
Ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra lay low in London as the junta that overthrew him purged his followers yesterday and took steps to possibly go after the vast assets of the tycoon turned politician.
Less than 48 hours after tanks rolled into the streets to overthrow Thaksin's regime, the Thai capital returned to normalcy, with all businesses reopening and Bangkok's notorious traffic jams returning with a vengeance.
Despite condemnation of the coup by Western and some Asian governments, hope emerged on the homefront that the new government might have a chance to resolve a bloody Muslim insurgency that has led to the deaths of more than 1,700 people.
An exiled rebel leader welcomed Thailand's military coup, saying that it could help resolve the country's bloody Muslim insurgency.
Lukman B. Lima, an exiled leader of one of several groups fighting the central government for a separate Muslim state, said coup leader Gen. Sondhi Boonyaratkalin, a Muslim, was the "only one who knows the real problems" of the Muslim-dominated provinces of southern Thailand.

