

Thailand deploys troops as anti-govt protests turn violent

AP, AFP, Bangkok

Thailand yesterday deployed troops to quell anti-government protests in Bangkok that left hundreds of people hurt as months of political turmoil boiled over into violence, officials said.

There were scenes of chaos outside Bangkok's parliament as police fired tear gas into the crowd of thousands, sending bloody protesters fleeing, while angry mobs tried to overturn police vehicles, an AFP correspondent said.

Government sources said over 358 people had been injured during the protests.

Eight Thai police officers were injured. Four officers were shot and wounded in the unrest, witnesses said. Others were reported to have been stabbed.

A woman was killed in a car bombing near the protest site, police said, although they said it was unclear if the blast was directly linked to the violence.

Army spokesman Colonel Sunsern Kaewkumnerd told AFP, "We have been asked by the police to help maintain law and order."

He did not specify how many soldiers had been deployed. However he mentioned that the troops were unarmed and came from the three armed forces -- army, navy and air force.

The violence, which began shortly after 6 am when police first cleared the street outside parliament, surged again in late afternoon, as the authorities fired countless volleys of tear gas to break through the protesters' cordon so lawmakers could leave.

Supporters of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) stormed Bangkok's main government compound on August 26 and have been barricaded there since, also protesting the government's plans to amend the constitution.

Late Monday, thousands heeded a call from a protest leader to march on parliament



Anti-government protesters take cover after the police fired tear gas during a dispersal operation near Government House in Bangkok yesterday. Thai police bombarded protesters with tear gas in a bid to end a blockade of parliament, leaving hundreds hurt as months of political turmoil boiled over into clashes, police and medics said.

for a "final battle."

Witnesses reported hearing gunshots, though who was firing them could not be determined. Some police had been armed with shotguns, and an AP Television News reporter saw a protester who was carrying a gun.

Rioting protesters also set fire to parked cars, trucks and vans.

About a mile away from the fighting, an unidentified person was killed when a Jeep SUV exploded near the headquarters of the Chart Thai Party, a member of the six-party coalition government of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat. Police said they suspected a bomb caused the blast, but could provide no other details.

Even before the violence escalated, the chaos prompted Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh to resign.

Riot police moved in after sunrise and fired multiple rounds of tear gas canisters to clear a path for the govern-

ment and lawmakers.

Somchai opened the parliamentary session after a 90-minute delay but as he spoke chaos escalated outside the building. Anti-government protesters regrouped and barricaded all four entrances to the Parliament, saying their goal was to block top officials from leaving the building.

Police fired more tear gas canisters to disperse a group of demonstrators armed with wooden batons and slingshots, who were throwing firecrackers at police. The opposition Democrat Party boycotted the speech.

After the parliamentary session ended, lawmakers said they were too afraid to leave the building.

"We are under siege now," said Kuthep Saikrajang, a spokesman of the ruling People's Power Party, speaking by mobile phone from inside Parliament. "But we will have to figure out a way to get out without using force."

Hundreds of lawmakers waited inside the lobby of the Parliament, monitoring the chaos outside.

At about 4:15 pm (0915 GMT), police fired off a third rally of tear gas to disperse about 8,000 protesters and create an exit for the trapped politicians, who hurried out of the building and drove away in waiting cars.

It was unclear how Somchai left the building, but he arrived by helicopter later in the day at the Supreme Command Headquarters to meet with army chief Gen. Anupong Paochinda and Supreme Commander Boonsrang Niempradit.

"Victory is near. We are surrounding the building," one of the protest leaders Somsak Kosaisuk told a cheering crowd outside Parliament, where protesters had chained one of the gates shut.

The unrest was the latest twist in a political crisis that has gripped Thailand for six weeks and virtually paralysed the government.

Thai media, meanwhile, announced that Queen Sirikit, the wife of the country's revered monarch, donated 100,000 baht (US\$2,900) to Bangkok's Vachira Hospital to help treat the injured, who claim they are carrying out their campaign out of loyalty to the palace.

Historic polls in Maldives today

AFP, Male

A bitter campaign ahead of historic elections in the Maldives drew to a close yesterday, with a veteran Asian leader and a prominent dissident each confident of victory.

The polls today will be the first time incumbent president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who has ruled with an iron fist since 1978, has allowed challengers for the top job in the Indian ocean tourist paradise.

He is facing five challengers, with his main rival seen as being 41-year-old Mohamed 'Anni' Nasheed -- a former political prisoner championed by supporters as the Muslim archipelago's very own Nelson Mandela.

But Gayoom, aged 71 and Asia's longest-serving ruler, is promising "five more dynamic years" in charge. Aides say they are confident Gayoom will win more than 50 percent of the vote on Wednesday and avoid a run-off.

The president has been drawing large crowds while hopping between outlying atolls, where over half of the 208,000-strong electorate live and where his more conservative, traditional Muslim manifesto is likely to strike a chord.

MILK SCANDAL China declines to say how many kids sick

AFP, Hohhot

China yesterday declined to release updated figures revealing how many children have been affected by the tainted milk scandal, as it attempted to boost confidence in its food safety standards.

The health ministry said it had new statistics showing how many babies were believed to have been left ill by the crisis, but did not release the data and gave no indication if or when it would make the latest information public.

"We've not released the latest number of cases because it is not an infectious disease, so it's not absolutely necessary for us to announce it to the public," a health ministry spokesman told AFP.

The World Health Organisation in Beijing said it had not been informed of the updated data either.

Previous official data said milk powder tainted with the chemical melamine had claimed the lives of four children and made a further 53,000 ill.

Authorities lift curfew in Indian Kashmir

AP, Srinagar

Schools, businesses and government offices reopened yesterday and vehicles were back on the streets in Indian Kashmir as authorities lifted a two-day curfew in the troubled Himalayan region.

Government forces removed steel barricades and layers of razor wires from roads across the Kashmir Valley and thousands of Kashmiris flooded the streets of Srinagar to buy food and other essentials.

The curfew was imposed across the region Sunday to thwart a huge pro-independence rally in Srinagar, the capital of India's only Muslim-majority state.

In August, the government also

prevented a similar rally by clamping on a nine-day curfew.

The two-day curfew period was largely peaceful, barring an incident in Baramulla, a town 55 kilometres north of Srinagar where government forces fired tear gas to disperse the crowd defying the ban.

No one was injured, said Abdul Gani Mir, a senior police officer. In recent months the disputed Himalayan region has seen some of its largest protests against Indian rule in two decades. At least 45 people have died in the unrest, most of them killed when Indian soldiers opened fire on Muslim demonstrators.

The recent demonstrations subsided during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which ended

Sept. 30. Syed Ali Shah Geelani, a key separatist leader, said the planners of the rally would meet today "to chart out future course of action."

Anti-India sentiment runs deep in Kashmir, where most people favor independence from mainly Hindu India or a merger with predominantly Muslim Pakistan. Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan, which both claim the region and have fought two wars over it.

Militant separatist groups have been fighting since 1989 to end Indian rule. Some 68,000 people, most of them civilians, have been killed in the uprising and subsequent Indian crackdown.

Anwar says he still has support to seize power

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said yesterday he still has enough support to topple the government and is deliberating over how to carry out his delayed plan to seize power.

Anwar dismissed a looming leadership transition in the ruling coalition, saying it would fail to win popular support and would do nothing to reform an administration mired in corruption.

Anwar said last month more than 31 lawmakers from the Barisan Nasional coalition were willing to switch sides and called on Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to agree to negotiations on a handover of power.

Abdullah has refused and Anwar has since said pulling off the first change of government in Malaysia's half-century history was a difficult task that could take some time.

"I am pleased by the general enthusiasm expressed by Malaysians who want to see change and rid this country of racism and corruption," Anwar said Tuesday.

Despite the delay in his plans, the 31 lawmakers "have given me their support and they have not renege on their support," he said.

Anwar said leaders of the three parties in the opposition alliance were meeting Tuesday to explore their options.

An official from Anwar's Keadilan party said the strategies included seeking an audience with Malaysia's king, Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin, to claim a mandate to rule.

Parliament resumes next Monday and the defecting lawmakers could physically cross the floor to show a change in allegiance.

And although the premier can under the constitution block any attempt to mount a vote of no confidence, opposition lawmakers can propose an ordinary motion criticising Abdullah, the official said.

Abdullah, who led the coalition to its worst ever performance in elections this year, is expected to announce Wednesday whether he will stand aside next

March in favour of his deputy Najib Razak. "I don't believe that Najib will be able to garner support or credibility, or manage the economy and rid the country of corruption," Anwar said.

"We are talking about a corrupt and rotten system, we are talking about a mismanaged system under Abdullah and I believe it is going to be worse under Najib."



Nepal's newly appointed living goddess, three-year-old Matine Shakya, known as Kumari, leaves her home to proceed to Kumari House where she will live for the next few years in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's president has backed the choice of a three-year-old girl to be worshipped as a living goddess, officials said -- upholding the age-old tradition despite the Maoist government's atheistic stance.

Int'l probe into Lanka killing

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's top opposition party called yesterday for an international investigation into a bomb attack the previous day that killed a popular former army general and 26 others.

Retired Maj Gen Janaka Perera, who was a member of a provincial assembly representing the opposition United National Party, his wife and some party officials were among those killed Monday when a suspected Tamil Tiger rebel detonated explosives strapped to his body, the military said.

Military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said the party officials were gathered to open a new office in the northern town of Anuradhapura when the assailant struck.

Tissa Attanayake of the United National Party said his party would not accept the government's explanation that the rebels were to blame for the attack at face value.

"We don't trust the government so we want the international police to do a complete investigation," Attanayake said. "The police have said that it was not informed of the party function, which is a lie. There was a search operation the day before but it did not stop this happening."

He also accused the government of ignoring repeated requests for a stronger security detail for Perera, adding they neglected his security because he was involved with the opposition.

Government officials could not be immediately reached for comment.

Monday's bomb attack came as government troops, in the midst of an offensive against the Tamil Tigers de facto state in the north, closed in on the rebels' administrative capital of Kilinochchi.

Tamil Tiger rebels have fought since 1983 to create an independent homeland for ethnic minority Tamils who have faced discrimination at the hands of successive governments controlled by majority ethnic Sinhalese.

The guerrillas are blamed for more than 240 suicide attacks. Meanwhile Tuesday, former Tamil Tiger leader Vinayagamoorthis Muralitharan, also known by his nom de guerre "Karuna," was sworn in as a legislator in Sri Lanka's parliament.

Int'l troops kill 60 militants in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Afghan and international troops killed 60 militants in southern Afghanistan in a battle that erupted after a patrol came under attack from several directions, the US-led coalition said yesterday.

The fighting was on Sunday in the southern province of Zabul, it said in a statement, without specifying if the militants were from the Taliban militia leading an insurgency in Afghanistan.

A joint patrol had come under attack with sniper fire, machine guns and heavy weapons from militants in multiple locations, the statement said.

"The combined forces responded with small arms and RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) fire as well as close air support, killing the militants," it said.

"Afghan National Security Forces and coalition forces killed 43 militants in Qalat district, Zabul province, October 5," it said.

Malaysia alarmed over Penan rape claims

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Authorities in Malaysian Borneo have called on police to investigate reports that women and girls from the Penan tribe have been raped by workers from jungle logging camps.

The plight of the Penan people was made famous in the 1990s by environmental activist Bruno Manser, who campaigned to protect their way of life and fend off the loggers, before he vanished in 2000 amid suspicion of foul play.

"Let the police do a full investigation. It is important that we get to the truth of all these things," George Chan, deputy chief minister of Sarawak state, said of the rape claims, according to the state news agency Bernama.

"This is criminal but we must have very firm evidence as it could portray a very bad national image," he said.

Allegations of attacks on the Penan tribe by workers from prominent Malaysian logging companies were last month reported by the Swiss-based Bruno Manser Fund (BMF), which champions indigenous rights.

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