

Thai PM gives army chief extended power

AP, Bangkok
Thailand's beleaguered government insisted yesterday that it had no plan for an immediate crackdown on protesters despite handing over security operations to the army chief, saying too many people are camped in central Bangkok to use force.

Abhisit abruptly put his army chief, Gen Anupong Paochinda, in charge of security operations late Friday after a botched police attempt to arrest leaders of the protesters, who are known as the Red Shirts. One protest leader escaped from a hotel balcony by rope, while at least two others took the stairs, to escape a police raid that the deputy prime minister had announced on television just minutes earlier.

While the army chief's new powers prompted speculation that the government was planning a crackdown, government spokesman Panitan Wattanyagorn appeared to rule out imminent force against the crowd. He noted the strategic difficulties of removing protesters from a congested part of the city that

includes luxury hotels and some of Bangkok's fanciest shops.

"People want this settled quickly, but the authorities also face their limitations," Panitan told The Associated Press. "There are a lot of people out there, and we cannot do anything harsh."

"Some newspapers have reported that now the government plans to use force again. This is not true," Panitan said. "The use of force to disperse the protesters was not in the order (given to Anupong)."

Panitan said the government's primary goal is to identify "terrorists" it says have infiltrated the Red Shirt organization and orchestrated violence last Saturday.

A failed attempt by security forces last weekend to flush thousands of anti-government protesters from the historic district of the capital erupted into the worse political violence the country has seen in two decades.

Volcanic ash grounds flights for third day

Biggest airspace shutdown since WW II could linger for 5 more days, world dignitaries to attend Polish president's burial amid air space shut down

AFP, London
Millions of people faced worsening travel chaos yesterday as a volcanic ash cloud from Iceland, which risks lingering over Europe for up to five more days, forced countries to extend flight bans.

Britain, Denmark and Germany lengthened bans on most flights in their airspace until 0000 GMT Sunday in the wake of the ash cloud that has caused the biggest airspace shutdown since World War II.

Winds blowing the massive cloud eastward from Iceland to Russia will continue in the same direction for at least two days and could go on until the middle of next week, the Icelandic Meteorological Office said on Saturday.

Ireland reimposed flight bans over its airspace until at least 1700 GMT on Saturday, while Austria, Belgium,

France and Switzerland said they would allow no flights until 1800 GMT.

Poland said it was shutting its airspace "until further notice".

The closure of Poland's airspace has thrown into doubt the attendance of world leaders including US President Barack Obama, due in the southern city of Krakow on Sunday for the burial of president Lech Kaczynski and his wife Maria.

The Kaczynski couple were among 96 people, most of them Polish dignitaries, killed in a plane crash in Russia last Saturday on their way to a World War II memorial service.

Some 16,000 flights in European airspace on Saturday have been cancelled due to the cloud of volcanic ash, said Eurocontrol, which coordinates air traffic control in 38 nations.

Whereas a normal Saturday would see 22,000 flights in Europe,

Eurocontrol said only about 6,000 would be operating -- and out of a routine 300-odd incoming transatlantic flights, a mere 73 had so far arrived.

The drifting dust had already forced the cancellation of about 16,000 flights on Friday.

The volcano on the Eyjafjallajokull glacier erupted on Wednesday, sending ash drifting towards Europe at an altitude of about eight to 10 kilometres (five to six miles).

British weather forecast service the Met Office indicated that "the volcanic ash cloud from Iceland was moving around and changing shape", Britain's National Air Traffic Services (NATS) said in a statement.

NATS added that "restrictions currently in place across UK controlled airspace will remain in place until at least 0100 UK time tomorrow".

Europe's three biggest airports -- Heathrow, Paris-Charles de Gaulle and Frankfurt -- were closed Saturday, leaving passengers stranded across the world as a global flight backlog built up.

An official for the Eurostar Channel tunnel rail service reported thousands more passengers than normal were set to travel on its trains between London and the continent on Saturday.

Justifying the widespread airport closures aviation officials have explained that airplane engines could become clogged up and stop working if they tried to fly through the ash.

In the past 20 years, there have been 80 recorded encounters between aircraft and volcanic clouds, causing the near-loss of two Boeing 747s with almost 500 people on board and damage to 20 other planes, experts said.

IRAN'S DISARMAMENT MEET

Ahmadinejad wants global body on Nuke disarmament

Syria, Lebanon, Iraq back Iran nuclear programme

AFP, Tehran
Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called yesterday for the setting up of a global body that would oversee nuclear disarmament.

"An independent international group which plans and oversees nuclear disarmament and prevents proliferation should be set up," Ahmadinejad said as he opened a two-day nuclear disarmament conference in Tehran.

Also Saturday Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the use of nuclear arms is "haram," an Islamic term meaning "prohibited by religion."

"We consider the use of nuclear arms as haram," Khamenei said in a message read out by an aide at the start of a two-day nuclear disarmament conference in Tehran hosted by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"Only the US government has committed an atomic crime. The world's only atomic criminal lies and presents itself as being against nuclear weapons proliferation, while it has not taken any serious

measures in this regard," Khamenei said.

Syria, Lebanon and Iraq backed Iran's atomic programme yesterday, which they said has "peaceful" aims, and insisted that Israel be stripped off its nuclear arsenal.

The foreign ministers of these three countries also stressed that Israel, the Middle East's sole but undeclared holder of a nuclear arsenal, must join the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

"We back Iran for pursuing peaceful nuclear technology," said Syria's Walid Muallem in a speech at the opening of a two-day nuclear disarmament conference hosted by Tehran, according to ISNA news agency.

His Lebanese counterpart, Ali al-Shami, said Iran was seeking "nuclear energy for peaceful aims and it was not deviating from the treaty," the official IRNA news agency reported.

And Hoshiyar Zebari, foreign minister of former foe Iraq, said: "We reject any threat against Iran and insist on Iran's rights to use peaceful nuclear energy."

The three leaders, however, strongly

urged for Israel to join the NPT.

"The major threat in the region is Israel which has nuclear warheads. Israel must join this treaty and take quick steps to destroy its nuclear weapons which number over 200 warheads," Muallem said.

Shami said Israel needed to be "stripped" of its nuclear arsenal.

"There is more need to strip Israel of its nuclear arsenal, as the international community is aware of its nuclear weapons capability and that this regime has defiantly declared it will use these weapons whenever it wants," he said.

"Since the atomic weapons of the Zionist regime are not inspected, there is a danger of these weapons being used in future. This regime must join the NPT without any conditions."

Zebari said Israel must allow UN inspectors in to its nuclear facilities, the state television website said.

Israel has not ruled out a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities to stop its atomic programme, which the West suspects is aimed at making weapons.

Tehran denies the charge.



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad delivers a speech at the opening session of a two-day nuclear disarmament conference hosted by Tehran yesterday. The hard-line president also called Washington's suspension from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) along with all other nations who possess nuclear arms.

Tehran wants US suspended from IAEA

AFP, Tehran
Iran slammed the United States as an "atomic criminal" which should be suspended from the UN nuclear watchdog yesterday, while urging changes to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

At a two-day nuclear disarmament conference in Tehran, the foreign ministers of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq voiced support for Iran's "peaceful" atomic programme and demanded that Israel join the nuclear NPT "without conditions."

At the start of the meeting, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ruled out any use of nuclear weaponry as "haram," meaning religiously banned under Islam.

He branded the United States an "atomic criminal" in his message that was read out by an aide at the conference, Tehran's answer to a nuclear summit held in Washington earlier this week.

Slain Tiger chief's mother denied entry to India

AFP, New Delhi
The ailing mother of Sri Lanka's slain Tamil Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran has been denied entry to India for medical treatment, the Press Trust of India reported yesterday.

Vallipuram Parvathi travelled from Malaysia to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on Friday night, but was prevented from leaving the aircraft, the Indian news agency said, giving no details.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet website also reported the incident, saying she was "refused landing by Indian immigration officials."

Philippines to drop charges against clan suspects

AFP, Manila
The Philippine government said yesterday it would drop murder charges against two prominent members of a powerful Muslim clan over the massacre of 57 people last year.

Zaldy and Akmad Ampatuan, initially alleged to be two of the key planners of the election-linked killings in the restive south, will be dropped from the list of those accused, Justice Secretary Agra said.

"I just issued the resolution. I have already instructed the prosecutors to amend the charges to drop them against Zaldy and Akmad," Agra told AFP, although he said lawyers opposed to his decision could appeal in court.

The move was sure to provoke outrage among the relatives' victims, who have repeatedly voiced concern that President Gloria Arroyo secretly intended to protect the Ampatuans because they were long-time political allies.

The prosecution in February charged that Zaldy, Akmad and other members of the Ampatuan clan conspired to murder a convoy of political rivals and journalists in Maguindanao province on November 23.

The murder, which shocked the world, was allegedly intended to prevent a rival from running against clan member Andal Ampatuan Jr for the post of provincial gov-

Sudan vote fell short of standards: EU

AP, Khartoum
The chief of the European Union's vote monitoring team said yesterday that Sudan's elections failed to meet international standards.

Veronique de Keyser, who headed a 130-member team, said names were missing from voter registries, election resources were not evenly spread to all parts of the vast country and there were cases of voter intimidation.

The five days of voting, which ended Thursday, were the first multiparty presidential, parliamentary and local elections in 24 years.

They were a key requirement of a 2005 peace deal that ended a 21-year civil war between the Sudan's predominantly Arab and Muslim north and rebels in the Christian-animist south. The war left 2 million people dead.

The EU mission concluded that key aspects of the election process were undermined.

"Although these elections paved the way for democratic progress, it is essential that the shortcomings are addressed," de Keyser told reporters in the capital, Khartoum.

"In addition to deficiencies in voter lists, week organization hindered voters' participation," she said. "I'm also concerned that polling was affected by intimidation and threats."

Palestinians call for release of thousands in Israeli jail

AFP, Ramallah
Palestinians held rallies and vigils in an annual day of support yesterday for the thousands of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons, a day after a detainee died in custody.

In the Gaza Strip, Ismail Haniya, the head of the Islamist Hamas movement's government, called on Palestinians to fight Israeli occupation "by any means" to put pressure on Israel to free the prisoners.

In the West Bank town of Ramallah, about 1,000 people marched through the centre, carrying pictures of imprisoned relatives or of Marwan Barghouti, a jailed leader of the mainstream Fatah party.

Barghouti, architect of the 2000 uprising against Israeli occupation, is serving five life terms but remains popular and is often spoken of as a successor to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

"We shall not rest until the prisoners issue is resolved," prisoners' affairs minister Issa Qaraqahe told the crowd in Ramallah.



A member of the 500-strong Karachi special police force, created to tackle violence in the volatile Sindh province city, struggles to keep hold of his cane as mob-reenactors attack in a rehearsal drill in Karachi yesterday. Unrest in Pakistan has fuelled international fears for the stability of the nuclear-armed Islamic republic.

Mutiny initiators

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from 13 Rifle Battalion who have not been included on the accused list, Col Khan said.

"As the BDR Act, 1972 doesn't allow trying any accused in absentia, the eight on the run including Moyn have not been included in this case. They will be tried separately once they are arrested," the prosecutor told The Daily Star.

Col Khan told the three-member court headed by BDR DG M Mainul Islam that 172 of the accused of 13 Rifle Battalion were in the Darbar Hall on that day to attend Darbar of slain DG Shakil.

But the 172 left Darbar Hall disobeying the DG's order, then took up arms and ammunition breaking into the armoury and opened fire and charged grenades.

The prosecutor told the court some of them killed army officers, destroyed evidence after the killings, dumped the bodies and held hostage the officers' family members.

The prosecution has around hundred witnesses in support of the charges against the accused and have photo-

graphs and video footages where it is evident that 36 of the total accused were involved in the mutiny along with other hundreds.

After submission of the prosecutor, the president of the court briefed all the accused about the relevant laws regarding mutiny, their rights and how they will proceed with the functions of the court.

Two other members of the court are Lt Col AKM Golam Rabbani and Major Sayed Hasan Taposh. Deputy Attorney General Mohammad Ullah Kislu was present at the court with the judges as representative of the attorney general.

The court adjourned its proceedings till 10:00am on October 13 and the day has been fixed for hearing on charge framing.

VERDICT IN FENI
The BDR Special Court-3 will deliver judgment of the mutiny case against 62 jawans of 19 Rifle Battalion in Feni today.

Earlier on March 29, the court after completing its trial proceedings fixed 11:00am today for pronouncing the judgment.

Merkel's odyssey trying to get home

AFP, Berlin
German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been caught up in the volcanic turmoil caused by the travel ash cloud from Iceland, which has paralysed European airspace, government sources said yesterday.

Merkel had been due back in Berlin on Friday afternoon from a trip to the United States, but was diverted to Lisbon because German airspace was closed.

She spent the night in the Portuguese capital, where on Saturday she was now due to catch a plane to Rome, the sources said. They were unable to say when she might be able to get back to Berlin.

German air safety agency DFS said Saturday that German airspace would remain closed until at least 2:00 am (0000 GMT) Sunday, 12 hours longer than it had anticipated on Friday.