

Thai Red Shirts gather in Bangkok

AFP, Bangkok

Thousands of Thailand's 'Red Shirts' gathered in Bangkok yesterday to mark seven months since a deadly military crackdown on their anti-government protest.

Wearing their signature colour, the demonstrators chanted 'There were dead people here!' and released red balloons in the Thai capital to commemorate those killed during unrest in April and May.

The demonstration saw street battles between protesters and troops in violence that left more than 90 people dead and nearly 1,900 injured.

Around 10,000 people attended yesterday's rally, according to an AFP reporter at the scene.

Jatuporn Prompan, one of the few senior Reds not detained by authorities, called for the release of 19 leaders currently being held on terrorism charges, awaiting a trial.



Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi (R) and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) present a book during the 83rd plenary session of Indian National Congress in New Delhi yesterday.

India's Congress vows to fight corruption

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress party yesterday vowed to fight corruption by fast-tracking court cases, as the government tried to overcome stinging criticism after a string of financial scandals.

Party president Sonia Gandhi, the key powerbroker of Indian politics, told the annual Congress leadership conference in New Delhi that the 125-year-old party must show zero tolerance of corruption to survive.

The pledge followed a telecom scandal that deadlocked an entire session of parliament and the arrests of some organisers of the Delhi Commonwealth Games on charges of swindling millions of dollars before the October event.

'There should be no tolerance for corruption and we have demonstrated this through our actions and even when no charges have been made, we have asked our ministers and chief minister to step down pending enquiry,' Gandhi said.

She said that corruption trials 'drag on indefinitely and undermine public confidence' so she backed 'a new system of fast-tracking all cases that concern corruption by public servants including politicians, including all of us.'

Congress, in alliance with other smaller parties, retained power in 2009 elections but is widely seen as struggling to push through its reform agenda despite India's healthy economic growth.

Telecoms Minister A. Raja, who belongs to a regional party in the Congress alliance, was forced to quit last month after the national auditor said he sold second-generation (2G) mobile phone licences for a fraction of their value in 2008. It estimated a revenue loss of up to 40 billion dollars.

The Congress chief minister of Maharashtra state also resigned last month over a property scandal in Mumbai, and executives from leading state banks have been arrested in a suspected bribes-for-loans racket.

Gandhi defended Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who has maintained an image of honesty amid India's murky political world, against allegations he failed to act over the 2G scandal.

'The party stands solidly behind him,' she said. 'He is the embodiment of sobriety, dignity and integrity.'

India's main opposition BJP party, which led the parliamentary deadlock to demand a cross-party probe into the 2G scam, accused Congress of being weighed down by corruption allegations.

'The speech very clearly shows the Congress is a party which is suffering from a mentality of a party under siege,' BJP spokeswoman Nirmala Sitharaman told a news conference.

'Attempts have also been made not to answer but very clearly to divert the attention of the people from the failures of the UPA (Congress alliance).'

Militants hold Afghan army centre after deadly attack

AFP, Kunduz

Militants were occupying an army recruitment centre in northern Afghanistan yesterday, officials said, in one of two attacks against Afghan military personnel that killed 13 people.

The building in Kunduz was being held by two rebels who survived an attack on the centre that had been carried out by four militants armed with suicide vests and automatic rifles, an official said.

The attackers killed four Afghan soldiers and four police officers in a gunfight before two of them were killed, deputy provincial governor Hamidullah Danishi told AFP. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

'Two of the attackers were shot dead by our security forces and two others are still in the building and are resisting from there,' Danishi said, referring to the military facility attacked by the insurgents.

He said the rebels had access to some military ammunition in the building, but refused to give details.

'They have taken control of a part of the building and from there they are resisting our security forces,' Danishi said.

An AFP reporter on the site said hundreds of Afghan security forces and US and German troops, based in Kunduz as part of NATO's International Security Assistance Force, had sealed off the area.

Military helicopters were hovering overhead, the AFP reporter said.

In the capital, Kabul, two suicide bombers targeted an army bus, killing five military personnel, defence ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi told AFP separately.

Nine other people were injured in the Kabul bombing, he said.

The vehicle was on its daily run, driving staff from the Kabul military training centre to work, when two suicide attackers armed with automatic rifles opened fire, Azimi said.

'One of the suicide attackers was shot dead but the second managed to detonate his explosives strapped to his body, and martyred five of our personnel and wounded another nine,' he said.

Sri Lanka relents over UN war crimes experts

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka has softened its stance and agreed to welcome a panel of experts appointed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to probe alleged war crimes, a minister said Saturday.

The experts will be allowed to meet a local panel reporting on moves to ensure that the country does not slip back into ethnic war.

Sri Lanka previously rejected Ban's panel as an interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state and instead set up its own 'Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)' to study, among other things, why a 2002 truce broke down between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels.

'We have rejected a probe by the UN Secretary-General, but the president has decided to allow his experts to visit Sri Lanka and go before the LLRC if they wished to,' said Media Minister Keheliya Rambukwella.

The government had earlier said it would not grant visas to the three-member panel to conduct their investigations into allegations of war crimes in the final stages of fighting last year.

US troubleshooter proposes North Korea military hotline

AFP, Seoul

US troubleshooter Bill Richardson has proposed to officials in Pyongyang that North and South Korea set up a military hotline to address incidents along their border, CNN reported yesterday.

He also proposed a military commission with members from North and South Korea plus the United States to monitor disputed areas in the Yellow Sea, CNN said, as Richardson visited Pyongyang aiming to defuse sky-high tensions.

Richardson spoke to CNN after meeting Major General Pak Rim Su, who leads North Korean forces along the tense border with the South, describing their talks yesterday as 'very tough' but making 'some progress'.

He added that a meeting of the UN Security Council being held yesterday might also calm the crisis after the South said it would proceed with a live-fire drill, an exercise which the nuclear-armed North said would prompt 'disaster'.

'It's a very, very tense situation, a crisis situation,' Richardson told CNN's Wolf Blitzer from Pyongyang. 'This is when the UN Security Council can be most effective.'

The general had also told Richardson North Korea has recovered the remains of

several hundred US servicemen killed during 1950-1953 Korean War and offered to help secure their return to the United States, CNN said.

Pak showed Richardson pictures of the remains and a dog tag retrieved from an American soldier's corpse, it reported.

'It was a positive gesture,' CNN quoted Richardson as saying.

A veteran negotiator with the reclusive communist state, Richardson has previously secured the return of US servicemen's bodies and held talks with Pyongyang over its controversial nuclear programme.

His trip to North Korea, officially in a private capacity, followed the North's shelling of a border island last month which killed four people including civilians and prompted threats of strong retaliation from Seoul.

Richardson said he hoped the Security Council -- which includes Pyongyang's sole ally, Beijing -- would issue a statement urging all sides to exercise maximum restraint (and to cool things down).

Scheduled to leave North Korea today, Richardson has also met the country's chief nuclear negotiator and leaders from the foreign ministry and military.

SOUTH KOREA DRILL: North Korea forces on alert

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has boosted the readiness of its military forces on the coast nearest to a planned live-fire drill by South Korea, the South's Yonhap news agency said yesterday, quoting a government source.

'The North Korean artillery unit along the Yellow Sea has raised its preparedness level,' the anonymous source was quoted as saying.

'Some fighter jets that had been inside the air force hangar have come out to the ground,' Yonhap quoted the source as saying, without confirming whether weapons had been moved closer to the south.

In November North Korean artillery fired on Yeonpyeong island, near the two countries' disputed maritime border, killing four people in its first shelling of a civilian area since the 1950-53 Korean War.

The attack has sparked fears of a conflict on the tense peninsula.

The North has threatened to hit back harder if South Korea carries out a planned live-fire drill in the area, but the South said yesterday it would go ahead with the exercise on today or tomorrow.

Career Opportunity advertisement with image of a hand holding a key.

M. I. Cement Factory Limited recruitment advertisement for various management positions.

Republicans block youth immigration bill

AP, Washington

Senate Republicans on Saturday doomed an effort that would have given hundreds of thousands of young illegal immigrants a path to legal status if they enrolled in college or joined the military.

Sponsors of the Dream Act fell five votes short of the 60 they needed to break through largely GOP opposition and win its enactment before Republicans take over the House and narrow Democrats' majority in the Senate next month.

President Barack Obama called the vote 'incredibly disappointing.'

'A minority of senators prevented the Senate from doing what most Americans understand is best for the country,' Obama said. 'There was simply no reason not to pass this important legislation.'

Dozens of immigrants wearing graduation mortarboards watched from the Senate's visitors gallery, disappointment on their faces, as the 55-41 vote was announced.

'This is a dark day in America,' said Jorge-Mario Cabrera, a spokesman for the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles. 'The Senate has ... thrown under the bus the lives and hard work of thousands and thousands of students who love this country like their own home, and, in fact, they have no other home.'

Hispanic activists and immigrant advocates had looked to the bill as a down payment on what they had hoped would be broader action by Obama and the Democratic-controlled Congress to give the nation's 10 million to 12 million illegal immigrants a chance at legal status.

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