

Violence reduces central Bangkok to a 21st-century Sarajevo

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It is obvious that something frightening has overcome the city of Bangkok. Even before daylight, during the midnight drive from the international airport, few taxi drivers can be persuaded to go into the centre, and the normally busy road on which my hotel stands is dark and silent.

Towering barricades of rubber tyres topped with forests of bamboo staves block either end of the street. The hotel receptionist warns us to keep the curtains tightly drawn all night for fear of snipers lurking on the roofs of surrounding buildings.

But it is only after dawn that the full extent of Bangkok's transformation becomes clear. From the heights of the hotel you look down upon a city within a city — the improvised fortress that the anti-government Red Shirt protesters have built in the commercial centre of one of South-East Asia's richest capitals.

For weeks they have occupied this district, which contains the most expensive property in Thailand, but over the weekend they have come under siege.

At least 33 people have been killed and more than 200 injured since Friday in bitter, ragged skirmishes between Red Shirts and the Thai Army. Columns of choking black smoke mark where the Red Shirts have lit bonfires of tyres to mark the territory that they still occupy, but which is steadily and patiently being eaten into.

Yesterday the Government of the Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, indignantly rejected a proposal by Red Shirt leaders for negotiations mediated by the United Nations. "As for the call of UN interference, no governments allow any organisations to intervene in their internal affairs," Panitan Wattanayagorn, the government spokesman, said after a state of emergency was declared in five more of Thailand's provinces.

People talk of an incipient "civil war" in Thailand, but if so it is a war in which only one side is armed. All day yesterday I tramped through central Bangkok watching the unequal confrontation between a 21st-century army and medieval fighters.

The heart of the Red Shirt movement is in the Ratchaprasong district, where the protests take their most symbolic form. The Red Shirts are an increasingly broad movement, but at their core are poor farmers from the northern provinces.

They are self-described peasants whose disgust is directed at the elite represented by Eton-educated Mr Abhisit and his supporters. The area they occupy is one of the glitziest in South-East Asia, a consumer paradise of department stores and five-star hotels, as well as foreign embassies. It is as if a mob of farm labourers shut down Knightsbridge and camped out in the shadow of Harrods. And since last week this resort of affluent tourists and fragrant Bangkok ladies has becoming increasingly rank.

Rubbish collection has stopped and mountains of foetid black bin bags are gathering just outside the

barricades. Mobile phones cease to function within 100 yards of the stage where the Red Shirt leaders deliver their speeches — the Reds have no doubt that the local relay stations have been shut down.

The number of protesters has eroded from a peak of more than 10,000 to less than half that; this has less to do with poor sanitation than with genuine fear about the fate of those who linger here. A month ago 24 protesters and soldiers died in a disastrous attempt to clear a protest site in another part of the city.

Chastened by its failure, the army has held back. But in the past few days it has begun a blockade of the road around Ratchaprasong in an effort to strangle the protest movement. Last Thursday a rogue army general and passionate Red Shirt supporter was felled by a single shot as he was being interviewed by an American journalist.

Cameras and photographers have recorded soldiers firing with telescopic sights and, as a result, people all over Bangkok live in fear of snipers, who are fancied to be on top of every building.

Imaginary or not, belief in the snipers signals a grim transformation in the thinking of many Thais, who believe that their own Government will shoot them in the head from the rooftops.

It is on the outer edges of the protest area that the most appalling violence is to be seen. Before someone realised what a bad message it sent, soldiers put up signs warning of "Live Firing Zones". Rama IV, a main road of banks and offices, resembles Sarajevo at the height of the Balkan wars.

At one end, soldiers armed with M16 rifles crouched behind sandbags, pointing their weapons down the street. In the alleys leading off it crouched young men armed with stones and firecrackers and boxes of petrol bombs, which they used to ignite the tyre barricades.

There was no hope whatever that these projectiles would reach the army lines. But all afternoon the men made darting sallies to the edge of safety, to lob what they had into the middle of the deserted street. They had little to gain by it, other than prolonging the stalemate. It was a symbolic expression of defiance, nothing more, and the risks could not have been greater.

Each petrol bomb was met with a fusillade of automatic rifle fire. Even in the afternoon sun you could see the luminescence of the tracer rounds, and the bullets dislodged chunks of wood from the telegraph poles along the street.

I saw two men carried away after being hit by bullets, and at the end of one alley was the congealing blood of a third, shot through the lung, who died soon after in hospital.

It is depressingly difficult to see any end to the violence, or any way of bringing together the two sides that race in parallel without any chance of meeting.

Mr Abhisit has never won an election: he came to power as the indirect consequence of a military coup. To the Red Shirts it is only a matter of justice that he should be tested at the polls. To the Government it is equally obvious that such matters cannot be determined by mob rule.

As for the killings, they are justified by Mr Panitan, the government spokesman, on the ground that those who die are not civilians but "terrorists".

"We will move forward," said Mr Abhisit in a national address. "We cannot retreat now." But there are certain to be more deaths before he reaches his destination.

P.S.

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