

Bangkok burns after Thai protest leaders arrested

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Downtown Bangkok turned into a flaming battleground Wednesday as an army assault toppled the Red Shirt protest leadership, enraging followers who fired grenades and set numerous fires that cloaked the skyline in a black haze.

Using live ammunition, troops dispersed thousands of anti-government protesters who had been camped in the capital's premier shopping and residential district for weeks. Four protesters and an Italian news photographer were killed in the ensuing gunbattles and about 60 wounded.

After Red Shirt leaders gave themselves up to police, rioters set fires at the Stock Exchange, several banks, the headquarters of the Metropolitan Electricity Authority, the high-end Central World shopping mall and a cinema complex that collapsed. Thick smoke drifted across the sky of this city of 10 million people.

The government declared a nighttime curfew in Bangkok, and said army operations would continue through the night. An announcement signed by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and broadcast on television said nobody in the capital was allowed out of their homes from 8 p.m. until 6 a.m unless they have permission from authorities.

Protesters also turned their rage on the local media, which they have accused of pro-government coverage. They attacked the offices of state-run Channel 3, setting fire to cars outside and puncturing water pipes that flooded the building.

"At Channel 3 need urgent help from police, soldiers!!!" tweeted news anchor Patcharasri Benjamasa. "News cars were smashed and they are about to invade the building."

Hours later its building was on fire. Its executives were evacuated by helicopter. Other staff escaped on foot.

The English-language Bangkok Post newspaper evacuated its staff after threats from the Red Shirts. A large office building down the street from the Post was set afire.

Unrest also spread to the rural northeast of the country, where Red Shirts, who claim Abhisit's government is elitist and oblivious to their plight, retain strong support.

Local media reported protesters set fire to government offices in the city of Udon Thani and vandalized a city hall in Khon Kaen. Udon Thani's governor asked the military to intervene. TV images also showed troops retreating after being attacked by mobs in Ubon Ratchathani.

The chaotic end to the Red Shirt gathering in Bangkok is certain to deal a heavy blow to the economy and tourism industry of Thailand, a key U.S. ally and long considered one of the more stable countries in Southeast Asia. The Red Shirts are demanding the ouster of Abhisit's government, the dissolution of Parliament and new elections.

Cabinet minister Satit Vongnongteay described the chaos as anticipated “aftershocks.”

“There are violent-prone protesters who remain angry,” Satit told a news conference.

At least 44 people have been killed, most of them civilians, in a week of violence in Bangkok as a military attempt to blockade the protesters — who had camped in the 1-square-mile (3-square-kilometer) Rajprasong district for six weeks — instead touched off street fighting, with soldiers firing on protesters who fought back mostly with homemade weapons.

The final crackdown began soon after dawn Wednesday, as hundreds of troops armed with M-16s converged on the Red Shirt base in Rajprasong, where high-end malls and hotels have been shuttered by the prolonged protest.

Armored vehicles crashed through barricades of piled tires and bamboo stakes, then soldiers gradually moved toward the protesters’ hub, opening fire and drawing return fire from militant Red Shirts, Associated Press journalists saw.

Bullets flew overhead and several grenades exploded near the soldiers, forcing them to pull back and take cover briefly before pushing forward. A Canadian freelance reporter was injured by grenade shrapnel. Two other journalists were wounded earlier, one Dutch man and an American documentary filmmaker. An Italian photographer was killed.

With no hope of resisting the military’s advance, seven top Red Shirt leaders turned themselves in on Wednesday afternoon, saying they cannot see their supporters — women and children among them — being killed anymore.

“Brothers and sisters, I’m sorry I cannot see you off the way I welcomed you all when you arrived here. But please be assured that our hearts will always be with you,” Nattawut Saikua, a key leader, said as he was being arrested.

“Please return home,” he said.

By mid-afternoon, the army announced it had gained control of the protest zone and the operations had ended — nine hours after troops launched the pre-dawn assault.

“Police officers and soldiers have now stopped their operation,” army spokesman Col. Sansern Kawekamnerd said.

But the Red Shirt leaders’ decision to surrender — over two months after they began their protest in the Thai capital — clearly enraged some followers. Rioting spread quickly to other previously unaffected areas of Bangkok — prompting the government declaration of a curfew for at least one night — and to cities in the northeast of the country.

P.S.

From Asian Correspondant.

<http://uk.asiancorrespondent.com/breakingnews/thai-protesters-attack-tv-station-s.htm>