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Thailand: Accountability must prevail in political crisis

All sides in Thailand's widening political conflict should immediately commit to ending human rights abuses, Amnesty International said today. Amnesty International welcomes the Thai government's pledge to investigate promptly, effectively, and impartially the recent violence, and urges it to provide accountability for any violations by security forces as well as abuses by violent protesters.

On the night of Saturday 10 April, the Thai military attempted to clear protesters of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) from Bangkok's old quarter, resulting in the deaths of at least 25 people (18 protesters, one foreign journalist, and six members of the security forces) and at least 840 wounded. The military used lethal force in the operations, while some individuals among the protesters also used guns and grenades, as well as improvised weapons. 134 people remain in the hospital, six in intensive care, as a result of the violence.

Amnesty International recognizes the Thai government's obligation to protect the lives and well-being of all people, including by exercising due diligence to prevent attacks by non-state actors.

Amnesty International also pointed out that the right to freedom of assembly protects only peaceful assembly, and that those who engage in human rights abuses may be subject to accountability for their actions. Opposition political leaders—including former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, an ally of the UDD—should publicly commit to ending human rights abuses, and to specifically ask their supporters to refrain from further violent attacks on political opponents.

Thai security forces must adhere to international principles on crowd dispersal and the use of force. Principle 14 of the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms states "In the dispersal of violent assemblies, law enforcement officials may use firearms only when less dangerous means are not practicable and only to the minimum extent necessary. Law enforcement officials shall not use firearms in such cases, except under the conditions stipulated in principle 9."

Principle 9, in turn, states "Law enforcement officials shall not use firearms against persons except in self-defence or defence of others against the imminent threat of death or serious injury, to prevent the perpetration of a particularly serious crime involving grave threat to life, to arrest a person presenting such a danger and resisting their authority, or to prevent his or her escape, and only when less extreme means are insufficient to achieve these objectives. In any event, intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life."

Background

Most members and factions of the UDD, commonly known as "Red Shirts" for the colour of their clothing, are supporters of former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin, who was deposed in a 2006 *coup d'etat*. Thaksin, who is currently in voluntary exile, faces numerous allegations of serious human rights violations.

The UDD has been demonstrating in Bangkok since 12 March, demanding the dissolution of Parliament, new elections, and since 10 April, the resignation and exile of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

On 18 April, PAD, which opposes the UDD, gave the government a seven day ultimatum “to enforce the law” – which can be interpreted as a demand to disperse the Red Shirts - before they too would begin demonstrations. Should it do so, the PAD must not engage in abuses of human rights. The PAD, known as the “Yellow Shirts”, was formed in 2006 to oppose Thaksin. They engaged in large-scale demonstrations in 2008, including an occupation of Bangkok’s two airports, against two successive pro-Thaksin governments.