

# Thai PM says he underestimated protesters

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Thailand's embattled prime minister acknowledged he initially underestimated the protesters who have occupied central Bangkok for weeks, but he offered no initiatives Sunday to end the country's prolonged, sometimes bloody political crisis.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva spoke in a nationally televised interview a day after the breakdown of talks with the protesters — who are demanding new elections — dashed hopes that a peaceful way could be found to end the stalemate.

Clashes have killed at least 26 people and wounded nearly 1,000 others since the "Red Shirt" protesters began occupying Bangkok's commercial center more than a month ago, closing down five-star hotels and upscale shopping malls and costing merchants millions of dollars per day.

"The solution process is ongoing but may not please everyone. The government, and not only the military, is preparing to be ready for what would lead to the next level," Abhisit said in a short statement to the interviewer. He did not elaborate during follow-up questions.

The program went off the air briefly, with the prime minister later blaming the disruption on "ill-intentioned people." Thailand's police force, army and other agencies are believed to be infiltrated by Red Shirt supporters, but it was unclear whether the opposition somehow disrupted the television signal.

Appearing with Abhisit, Thai army chief Gen. Anupong Paochinda said the crisis must be solved by legal means and denied there were any significant rifts within the military.

"We won't use violence but as I've said earlier, the situation has escalated toward violence so the military will have to adjust its measures," the army chief said. "As the PM said, if there is anything needed to bring back peace, we'll do it."

While stopping short of accusing the Red Shirts, Abhisit said that rocket-propelled grenades fired in Thursday's violence in the heart of the city's financial district were launched from inside a protest site by "terrorists." At least one person was killed Thursday, and 25 others died April 10 during clashes as soldiers unsuccessfully tried to clear the protesters from one of their camps.

Abhisit said that he initially underestimated the protest movement.

"I admit, I didn't expect to see such a force ready to go this far," he said.

The conflict has been characterized by some as class warfare, pitting the country's vast rural poor against an elite that has traditionally held power.

The protesters, who claim the government took power illegitimately, had previously demanded Parliament be dissolved immediately, while the government said it would disband parliament in six months.

The Red Shirts softened their stance Friday, offering the government a proposed compromise of 30

days to disband the legislature in a move they said was aimed at preventing further bloodshed.

Red Shirt leaders said that if no compromise was reached they would continue their demonstrations in the Bangkok commercial district that they have transformed into a protest camp with barricades of tires and bamboo stakes, paralyzing business and daily life in the city.

Many in the capital have grown weary of the confrontation and the disruptions, and thousands of residents gathered at a park Saturday to demand the protests end. "Please stop the mob — I want a normal life," read one sign.

The Red Shirts consist mainly of rural supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and pro-democracy activists who opposed the military coup that ousted him in 2006. They believe Abhisit's government is illegitimate because it came to power under military pressure through a parliamentary vote after disputed court rulings ousted two elected pro-Thaksin governments.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Abhisit's government has threatened to curtail the protests but has failed to follow through. Military units from the 200,000-strong army have been routed in several confrontations with the crudely armed demonstrators. The police have often melted when faced with determined protesters.

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