

Abhisit still believes in a peaceful resolution

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Anti-government protesters forced a rush hour shutdown of Bangkok's busy elevated train system Tuesday and promised to expand the protests that have plunged the Thai capital into chaos by sending teams of demonstrators throughout the city.

The prime minister, who has broken off negotiations with the protesters occupying parts of central Bangkok, said he hoped to resolve the crisis soon without resorting to force, but appealed for patience.

"We recognize that as every day passes by, the people of Thailand suffer, the country suffers, but we want to make sure that there is rule of law," Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva told CNN's Christiane Amanpour, according to quotes posted on the news channel's website. "We will try to enforce the law with minimum losses and we will try to find a political resolution, but it takes time, patience and cooperation."

The four-hour closure of Bangkok's Skytrain caused commuter chaos and raised concerns in the tense capital, where hundreds of soldiers armed with automatic weapons were deployed to guard stations and other major city boulevards.

At least 26 people have been killed and nearly 1,000 wounded since protesters known as the Red Shirts — who view the government as illegitimate — began occupying parts of Bangkok in mid-March, closing down five-star hotels and shopping malls and devastating the country's vital tourism industry.

The government has not given a clear statement of how it plans to end the standoff after rejecting a Red Shirt compromise proposal to disband parliament within 30 days instead of immediately.

In his interview with CNN, recorded Monday, Abhisit said he could not disband parliament without consulting other parties and said any political negotiations "should be conducted under conditions where there's peace, where people are allowed to express their opinions, and not under force or intimidation by a small group of people."

Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban warned Tuesday that security forces would "intensify operations," but did not elaborate or say whether authorities would try to evict protesters from the streets, which would almost certainly lead to more bloodshed.

"We have been patient for almost two months," Suthep told reporters. "If there was a way we could reason with them, we would try. However, we have seen that these are people we cannot talk with."

Thailand's ailing King Bhumibhol Adulyadej, who is seen as the best hope to end the crisis, spoke publicly Monday evening for the first time since the crisis began. He made no direct comment on the political situation during a ceremony to appoint new judges, but made oblique calls for stability.

"In the country, there might be people who neglect their duties, but you can set an example that there are those who perform their duties strictly and honestly," the 82-year-old king said.

The king's lack of a clear statement signaled he was not prepared to take a public role in resolving the crisis, as he did in 1973 when he stopped bloodshed during a student uprising and again in 1992 during anti-military street protests.

Before sunrise Tuesday, a group of Red Shirts entered a downtown Skytrain station and placed 30 tires on the platform, prompting authorities to suspend service, the Bangkok Mass Transit System said in a statement. Authorities checked security and restarted the trains in midmorning, though they planned to close stations after dark amid fears of more violence.

A Red Shirt protest leader said his group took the action after hearing that soldiers would use the trains to send reinforcements to their main protest site.

"Bangkok people, please understand we did not want it to affect you, but we only want safety," said Nattawut Saikua, a protest leader. "They removed (the tires) right away when asked."

Government spokesman Panitan Wattanayagorn said security forces were deployed to "provide security and safety for the public" at train stations and on highways leading to Bangkok, and to ensure that the demonstrators "do not spread out."

Overnight, hundreds of protesters tried to block police and soldiers who were driving to Bangkok from the northern suburbs to bolster security forces in the capital. Protesters boarded trucks loaded with barricades and hurled them out, while others let air out of the tires of official vehicles.

In what appeared to be an effort to heighten pressure on the government, protest leaders said they would send mobile teams out of their encampment and into other parts of Bangkok on Wednesday with speaker trucks to distribute leaflets and CDs explaining their side of the story.

Such movements could provoke friction with a group of pro-government counter-protesters, known as the Yellow Shirts.

Abhisit called on the Yellow Shirts to exercise restraint.

"We will do all we can to make sure that no clashes occur between the two groups of people," he said.

The Red Shirts consist largely of poor, rural supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and pro-democracy activists who opposed the military coup that ousted him in 2006 on corruption allegations. The group believes that Abhisit's government — backed by the urban elite — is illegitimate, having been helped into power by the country's powerful military.

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