

Thai PM rejects protesters' demand
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Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva on Monday rejected an ultimatum by tens of thousands of protesters to dissolve parliament as they marched on a military barracks sheltering the government.

The demonstrators, loyal to ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, demanded Abhisit call new elections or face mounting protests, prompting military officials to boost troop numbers and put in place evacuation plans.

"The protesters have demanded that I dissolve the house before midday (0500 GMT) today, but the coalition parties agree the demand cannot be met," Abhisit said on national television, from the barracks.

"Elections must be held under common rules and genuine calm. We have to listen to other people's voices, not just the protesters," he said.

Abhisit left the army base by helicopter immediately after his announcement, saying he wanted to inspect the city traffic, snarled up by the moving rally.

The first group of red-clad protesters had earlier arrived at the barracks where Abhisit had been staying along with key ministers and military top brass.

At least 86,000 so-called Red Shirts had been gathered since Saturday at a rally ground close to government offices in Bangkok's historic quarter, where soldiers and riot police have been deployed under a strict security law.

'We'll keep fighting'

The Red Shirts travelled in convoy to the barracks on the capital's northern outskirts in trucks, buses, cars and pick-up trucks, promising non-violence and vowing to return to the main rally after their doorstep.

"We will come back here. We'll keep fighting," Red Shirts leader Nattawut Saikua told the cheering red-clad crowd before it departed.

Thai army spokesman Colonel Sunsern Kaewkumnerd said about 2,000 soldiers were manning the 11th infantry army barracks, with three helicopters on standby to whisk leaders away if needed.

"We will push out the protesters if they trespass into the base. The final step is that rubber bullets would be fired at them, but the army has no wish to disperse the demonstration," Sunsern insisted.

The Red Shirts had dubbed their rally a "million man march" but police estimated their numbers reached only 86,000. Protest leaders gave various figures all far higher than 100,000.

Authorities have deployed a 50,000-strong security force including soldiers and riot police across Bangkok and surrounding provinces for the rally, under a strict law that allows authorities to ban gatherings and impose curfews.

'This is not a one-person issue'

The Red Shirts are loyal to populist former prime minister Thaksin, who was ousted in a coup in 2006 and is living abroad, mostly in Dubai, to avoid a jail term for corruption.

Twice-elected Thaksin is loathed by Bangkok's establishment, which accuses him of corruption and disloyalty to the revered royal family.

Last month Thailand's top court confiscated 1.4 billion dollars (RM4.6 billion) of the telecoms tycoon's wealth.

Addressing the crowd by video link late Sunday, Thaksin urged his supporters to press on.

"I ask all Red Shirts not to give up. Don't worry about me. This is not a one-person issue, we all fight for justice. I am the victim of bullies among the elites," Thaksin said from an unspecified location in Europe.

Since the coup in 2006, Thailand has been wracked by a string of protests by the Red Shirts and their rival Yellow Shirts, whose campaign in 2008 led to a crippling nine-day blockade of the country's airports.

The current rally is the largest in Bangkok since the Reds rioted in April last year, leaving two dead and scores injured.

- AFP

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