

Thailand protesters press plan to bring down govt
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Tens of thousands of red-clad Thai protesters pressed on Tuesday with their rally calling for snap elections, despite the prime minister's firm rejection of their demands that he step down.

The "Red Shirts", loyal to deposed premier Thaksin Shinawatra, showed no sign of giving up their protests in the streets of Bangkok, where security was tightened after four grenades hit an army base in the capital on Monday.

The attacks wounded two soldiers and raised tensions, although it was not yet clear if they were linked to the protesters, who had massed in front of a separate barracks where Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva was taking refuge.

In a bizarre development, protest leader Nattawut Saikur said the Red Shirts would ask demonstrators to donate a small amount of blood on Tuesday and spill it at the gates of Government House to demonstrate their fierce determination.

"If Abhisit still wants to continue as prime minister regardless of our demands, he must walk across Red Shirt people's blood," he said, sparking concern among health officials who said the stunt could spread diseases.

The Red Shirts rail against the perceived elitism of the government and say it is undemocratic, as it came to power via a December 2008 parliamentary vote that followed a controversial court ruling ousting Thaksin's allies.

Thaksin urges to fight on

Thaksin's followers are largely from the poor rural north and support him for the populist policies he introduced before being ousted in a 2006 coup.

But the ex-premier, who lives abroad to avoid a jail term for corruption, is loathed by the rival "Yellow Shirts", who are supported by Bangkok's elites and accuse him of graft and disloyalty to the revered royal family.

Since the coup Thailand has been rocked by protests from both sides.

Last month Thailand's top court confiscated 1.4 billion dollars (RM4.7 billion) of the telecoms tycoon's wealth. He made an impassioned plea to supporters by video link on Monday for the third consecutive night, urging them to fight on.

By Monday evening the Red Shirts had returned to their main rally site in Bangkok's old quarter from the army base in the city's northern outskirts, after Abhisit left the barracks by helicopter.

Earlier Abhisit, who heads a fragile six-party coalition, had made a nationally televised address to reject the red-clad crowd's demand.

"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.

The pro-Thaksin forces had dubbed their rally a "million man march" but police have estimated their numbers at only 86,000 since they began arriving on Friday. Protest leaders gave various figures, all a lot higher than 100,000.

One suspect arrested

Authorities said a 50,000-strong security force was on hand across Bangkok and surrounding provinces, under a strict security law allowing authorities to ban gatherings and impose curfews.

A senior police official said a male suspect had been arrested Monday for the grenade attacks and his car confiscated, but the man denied any involvement in the incident.

- AFP

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