

Watching Thailand's chaos from the skytrain

By JAMES BURKE
Epoch Times Staff

BANGKOK—Passengers on Bangkok's overhead light railway system—the BTS skytrain—are wearing plenty of neutral colours these days. Many of the city's middle class, the bulk of the skytrain's passengers, are avoiding any association with the country's numerous coloured-shirt political groups, particularly the red-shirted supporters of fugitive former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

It has been a long month for many of the residents of the city of nearly nine million people. Six weeks of protests in Bangkok by tens of thousands of anti-government red shirts—formally known as the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD)—have included vicious street fighting that resulted in 25 deaths and the occupation of a central shopping district which is threatening to spill over to the city's financial hub.

As the skytrain makes its way toward the Silom stop, it is easy to catch a glimpse of the red shirts' main base and its stage where their leadership delivers fiery speeches and repeats demands that Thailand's Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva dissolve Parliament and make way for fresh elections.

The bulk of the red shirts' speeches allege that the 44-year-old Prime Minister Abhisit and his government achieved office unlawfully, and were installed by the Thai military and the bureaucratic elite.

A new addition to the area around the stage since the red shirts took it, is a massive black net hanging some 12 metres (40 feet) above the ground which shades an area the size of four tennis courts. Rumour has it—and rumours are rife—that the netting has been put in place to thwart gunmen hired by unhappy businessmen to shoot some of the red shirt leaders so they can reopen their businesses.

After changing skytrains, the trip follows close to a mile's worth of road occupied by the red shirts to a barricade that they built opposite of positions held by Thai military at Silom Road, which is considered Bangkok's version of Wall Street.

The red shirts had spoken of extending their occupation of the city into Silom, but pulled back after the government brought in the military with orders to block them with lethal force if they attempted.

From the skytrain, as it passed over the area, some 50 red shirts could be seen standing on their



COUNTERPROTEST: Office workers on their lunchbreak wave Thai national flags in a pro-government rally in Bangkok's Silom Road which is under threat from being occupied by anti-government red shirt protesters. JAMES BURKE/THE EPOCH TIMES

barricades yelling at their opposition across the intersection and waving at passing traffic. Piles of sharpened bamboo poles were stocked up behind them.

On the overpass above, red shirts have also built a tire barricade, taking up one lane of traffic—giving them some high ground, but not as high as the Sala Daeng BTS

walkway where armed soldiers crouch behind sandbags.

Off the skytrain and down on the Silom Road itself, pedestrians make their way past razor wire while middle-aged women hand out water and cool wipes to combat soldiers and riot police. Hundreds of office workers on their lunch break waved Thai national flags and cheered on

speakers standing on a pick-up truck's roof denouncing the red shirts' siege of their city.

Counter rallies to the red shirts are becoming more common in the city, with a large one expected to occur on Friday, according to local newspapers. Things are still heating up in the Thai capital with most of the chaos accessible by skytrain.

Jewish settlers clash with Israeli army on West Bank

By GIDON BELMAKER
Epoch Times staff

JERUSALEM—An Israeli soldier was slightly wounded in clashes between Israel defense force (IDF) soldiers and Israeli settlers in the settlement of Ytzhah, near the Palestinian city of Nablus, announced an IDF spokesperson on Tuesday.

According to the announcement, a team of soldiers tried to prevent settlers from Ytzhah from entering the Palestinian village of Madma. The team asked the settlers to leave the area after presenting documents to them declaring the area a closed military zone.

The young settlers refused to leave and started quarrelling with the soldiers. Soon after, a larger group of youth from Ytzhah came to the area and started throwing stones at the soldiers. One soldier suffered light wounds and the tires of a military vehicle were slashed, the announcement said.

According to a report by Arutz Sheva, a news website and radio station associated with the Israeli

religious right, the Ytzhah settlers claimed that the IDF used live ammunition during the clash. The IDF denied the allegations.

The settlement of Ytzhah is considered to be an ideologically extreme settlement, with residents having been involved in violent acts against Palestinians and security forces in the past. Instances of uprooting the olive trees of Palestinians in nearby villages or preventing them from cultivating their fields have been attributed to settlers from Ytzhah.

The Israeli settlements in the West Bank are varied in nature. While some settlements harbour strongly ideological groups who see importance in strengthening the Jewish presence in what they call the land of the Bible, other cities and towns do not have a specific ideological background.

In response to this latest incident, the IDF stated that violence against soldiers is crossing a line that must not be tolerated, and that the Israeli army will deal with this incident according to the law and with appropriate firmness.

Senate committee passes financial reform bill

Wall Street Transparency and Accountability Act seeks to rein in derivatives

By JIM FOGARTY
Epoch Times Staff

A U.S. Senate committee passed a financial reform bill Wednesday that would increase Wall Street regulation and mitigate risks as the push for a Senate financial overhaul plan moves closer to floor debate.

The Wall Street Transparency and Accountability Act—which claims to bring “100 percent transparency” and increase government regulation of derivatives by closing loopholes and preventing future bailouts—passed the Agriculture Committee by a vote of 13-8.

Republican Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa joined 12 Democrats in the panel's approval of the bill.

Sen. Grassley, in a statement on his website, stated that “transparency is the right policy,” and committee chairman Blanche Lincoln's bill was an “important step in the

along party lines.

On Friday, Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky sent a letter signed by the Republican caucus to Majority Leader Sen. Harry Reid asking him “to take a bipartisan and inclusive approach, rather than the partisan path you chose on health care.”

Sen. McConnell's wording in the letter agreed with the tone of Sen. Lincoln's agriculture committee bill in attempting to prevent future taxpayer-subsidized “too big to fail” financial bailouts. But the Republican position seeks to go further, to include government-subsidized entities—such as Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

In addition, Republican opposition to Sen. Chris Dodd's banking committee bill includes concerns over “new and unlimited regulatory powers that will stifle small businesses and community banks.”

Despite differences, Republicans on Wednesday seemed optimistic that a bipartisan solution was achievable. “We're not there yet, but we're closer than we've ever been,” Sen. Richard Shelby said on Wednesday.

GOLDMAN SACHS AND REFORM

Sen. Dodd, in advocating for his financial reform bill, drew on a recent

U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) lawsuit that accuses investment firm Goldman Sachs with securities fraud charges.

“Our bill would have prevented those kinds of events from happening,” Sen. Dodd said at a

press conference on Monday.

Critics point to the timing of the Goldman Sachs scandal and emerging financial reform legislation. On Monday, Canada's Financial Post published an article on the SEC lawsuit. “Goldman Charge Looks More Like Politics than Fraud.”

Conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh brought notice to the politics of the issue on Tuesday, when he publicized the connection between Google search results and Obama's push for Wall Street reform.

When searching for “Goldman Sachs SEC” on Google Tuesday, search results were topped by a link to the BarackObama.com Web site and the title: “Help Change Wall Street.”

Reuters reported that Senate Democrats will seek a procedural vote of “cloture” on the Senate financial reform bill Thursday, to prevent a possible filibuster and move the bill to the final floor debate. The procedure will need 60 votes to pass.

Iconic Spanish judge faces charges

By AURELIEN GIRARD
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Baltasar Garzon, the Spanish judge who ordered the arrest of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1998 on the basis of “universal justice” principles, is now likely to be forced to resign on April 22.

Garzon is accused of abusing his power and if convicted, could be forbidden from any legal activity for the next 12 to 20 years. At 54 years old, such a decision would put an end to his career.

Garzon is being sued for launching an investigation in 2008 that aimed to understand the human rights abuses that led to the disappearance of an estimated 114,000 people during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and repression by Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975).

In Spain, an amnesty law enacted in 1977 forbids any such legal procedure against Franco's former supporters. Garzon tried to get around this obstacle by calling the abuses committed by right-wing Franco supporters “crimes against humanity.” In this way, he hoped to supersede the amnesty law.

But prosecutor Luciano Varela called it an “artificial legal trick” and accepted complaints from three far-right associations, including the historical Spanish fascist movement, Spanish Falange.

SPANISH OPINION DIVIDED
“If [Garzon] is condemned, that



Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon. DOMINIQUE FAGET/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

would be a new victory for Franco,” said internationally acclaimed filmmaker Pedro Almodovar during a rally of support for the judge in Madrid on April 15.

Jose Blanco, organization secretary and No. 2 in the Spanish Socialist Party who attended the protest, told Le Monde newspaper that he could “hardly understand that the Falange could send to the chair of defendants the man who tried to restore the memory of dictatorship victims.”

Left-wing supporters of Garzon claim the notorious judge has become the victim of a too-conservative Spanish justice system.

However, Christian Galloy, an analyst of Spanish politics, observed on the LatinReporters.com website that the two public prosecutors who initiated the procedure against Garzon “belong to the progressionist branch of Spanish justice. This contradicts what some media are saying that Garzon is a victim of magistrates having some nostalgia of Franquism.”

According to Spanish prosecutors, only Spanish lawmakers are entitled to abrogate the amnesty law, as was done in Argentina in 2003.

Garzon benefits from strong support for his hunt of South

American torturers, ETA (Basque) terrorists, al-Qaeda leader Osama Ben Laden, and more recently Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Esteban Beltran, director of Amnesty International Spain, told LatinReporters that the legal actions against Garzon “send an awful message to other countries.”

One of Garzon's lawyers, however, said Garzon “does not feel like he is being persecuted by the Supreme Court. He even thinks that protests made in his favour—and he does not control them—could be harmful to him.”

Garzon faces other legal actions and therefore would certainly not wish to irritate the Supreme Court. He is accused of having favoured the Santander banking group from which he had received a generous payment of \$300,000 as compensation for conferences attended in the United States.

According to Spanish Justice, Garzon later handed a quick “not guilty” verdict against the CEO of Santander when he was targeted by a complaint in Spain, and did not declare any conflict of interest.

A poll conducted by Le Monde found that 68 percent of socialist voters support Garzon, while 68 percent of popular party (right-wing) voters support the procedure against him—a clearly divided opinion in a country that still fears its unity could be threatened by spectres of the past.

‘Transparency is the right policy’

—Sen. Charles Grassley