

International

Thai protesters rally as leaders summoned over defamation

First use of draconian law in almost three years

BANGKOK: Thai pro-democracy protesters gathered in Bangkok yesterday as police summoned 12 of their leaders to answer charges of royal defamation, the first use of the draconian law in almost three years.

At least a thousand demonstrators—many brandishing the yellow toy ducks that have become a symbol of the movement—took to the streets near the headquarters of the Siam Commercial Bank (SCB) to protest at the secrecy surrounding King Maha Vajiralongkorn's wealth. Thailand has for months been rocked by youth-led protests demanding a new constitution, reform of the untouchable monarchy, and for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha to resign.

Tensions in Bangkok have been rising—police used water cannon and tear gas at a rally outside parliament last week, with 55 people injured and six shot in scuffles with royalists. The source of the gunfire is under investigation. The protesters had planned to rally outside the headquarters of the Crown Property Bureau yesterday, prompting police to lock down the area with razor wire and rows of shipping containers.

But overnight they flagged they would switch the protest to the main office of the Siam Commercial Bank—in which the king is a major shareholder—to avoid potential clashes with a rival ultra-royalist rally. Sea, 27 a masters student from Phuket, described the police use of containers to protect the Crown Property Bureau as a “joke”.

“I have two emotions. First I was angry and then I laughed. It's very funny. On the internet we make fun of their actions every day,” Sea said. Many protesters

were sporting yellow ducks-on T-shirts, hats and helmets—after demonstrators used larger inflatable versions last week to defend themselves against police water cannon and tear gas.

As protester numbers grew, there was a festive atmosphere with police—not wearing riot gear—keeping a relatively low profile. Stalls sprang up yesterday selling a huge range of yellow duck merchandise, while some were even giving out pretend money adorned with a crowned version of the bathtime toy.

Royal wealth

The focus of yesterday's protest is the secrecy surrounding the royal finances. Soon after coming to power following his father's death in 2016, the new king took control of the Crown Property Bureau, which has assets in banks, companies and prime real estate. The bureau's board was previously headed by the finance minister in an arrangement that gave a sheen of public oversight to a trust some experts estimate is worth \$30-\$60 billion. The full assets are privately held and remain a closely guarded secret.

On the eve of yesterday's protest, 12 leaders received police orders to come for questioning over allegations of royal defamation. Thailand has one of the harshest lese majeste laws in the world. It is routinely interpreted to include any criticism of the monarchy—including content posted or shared on social media. Under section 112 of the penal code, anyone convicted of defaming, insulting or threatening the king, queen or their faces between three and 15 years in prison on each count.



BANGKOK: Pro-democracy protesters take part in an anti-government rally outside the headquarters of the Siam Commercial Bank in Bangkok yesterday. — AFP

The laws have not been invoked since 2018, but last week Prime Minister Prayut gave the green light for authorities to use them, after protesters daubed anti-royal graffiti around police headquarters in central Bangkok. “I'm not scared just one bit and I believe that by being sent the 112 summons, it will bring out more people to (Wednesday's) rally,” Parit “Penguin” Chiwarak, one of the 12 called for

questioning, said.

“Does this mean the monarchy has declared an all-out war with the people—is that right?” Government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri told AFP the authorities were “increasingly concerned about attempts to undermine the rule of law” and would use “all pertaining laws” to pursue troublemakers. — AFP

Homes evacuated as cyclone threatens India

PUDUCHERRY, India: Several thousand people in south-eastern India fled their homes yesterday, out of the path of a cyclone due to slam coastal areas after midnight, bringing with it heavy rain.

Nivar, classified as a very severe cyclonic storm, was expected to pack winds of 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour and gusts of up to 145 km/h when it makes landfall, forecasters said. Thousands of state and national emergency personnel have been deployed in the southern regions of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Puducherry, where the cyclone was due to hit in the early hours of today morning. Local authorities have declared a public holiday, shutting everything except emergency services, and a spokesman for the National Crisis Management Committee said thousands had been evacuated from their homes.

Heavy rain was already falling in the region, and was expected to intensify in the next few hours.

In Puducherry, the rain-soaked streets and markets were all deserted. Lieutenant Governor Kiran Bedi appealed to locals to stay indoors and abide by authorities' instructions.

“Move to high places wherever you have to. There are relief centers. Please move there,” Bedi said in a video message on Twitter. But people in



COLOMBO: Women walk through a road during a rain shower as cyclone Nivar approaches, in Beruwala, some 58 km from the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo yesterday. — AFP

some pockets along the coast were reluctant to abandon their homes and fishing boats and move to government shelters, an AFP reporter said.

In Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai, authorities said they were also closely observing the level of reservoirs and lakes to avoid a repeat of floods in 2015 when several hundred people died in the state.

Lake Chembarambakkam outside Chennai was expected to discharge extra water because of the heavy rains, and people in low-lying areas around the discharge area had been warned.

The cyclone's center was expected to pass some

175 kilometers northeast of Sri Lanka's northern tip early yesterday. No evacuation orders were issued in Sri Lanka but heavy rains were forecast, particularly in the north of the island nation. Fishermen there were advised not to go out to sea.

More than 110 people died after “super cyclone” Amphan ravaged eastern India and Bangladesh in May, flattening villages, destroying farms and leaving millions without electricity. But the death toll was far lower than the many thousands killed in previous cyclones of that size, a result of improved weather forecasting and better response plans. — AFP

Don't cut foreign aid, Malala urges UK

LONDON: Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai has urged Britain not to cut overseas aid, ahead of a major announcement by the country's finance minister yesterday. Rishi Sunak is expected to suspend a legal commitment to spend 0.7 percent of gross national income on international development.

Reports suggest he will cut the level of aid to 0.5 percent in his Spending Review, as the government seeks to support the coronavirus-ravaged economy and looks for savings from an aid budget worth £15 billion (\$20 billion, €17 billion). In a tweet late on Tuesday, Yousafzai reminded Sunak and Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the 0.7 percent pledge, renewed in last year's Conservative election manifesto.

“When you announce spending priorities... I hope you'll deliver on that promise,” she wrote.

The Pakistani education campaigner wrote that leaders must “prioritise education” as “Covid-19 could force 20 million more girls out of school”. Her plea came as five former prime ministers also opposed the planned cut. Among them was former Conservative leader John Major, quoted by The Times newspaper yesterday as saying the spending cut was “morally wrong and politically unwise”.

Former Labour prime minister Tony Blair said on Saturday that Britain's overseas aid budget had an impact “measured literally in millions of lives”.



In this file photo, Pakistani activist and Nobel Peace prize laureate Malala Yousafzai attends an event about the importance of education and women empowerment in Sao Paulo, Brazil. — AFP

David Cameron, whose coalition government enshrined the 0.7 percent in law, has said abandoning it would be a “moral, strategic and political mistake”.

Johnson's government has repeatedly committed to maintaining the spending and his Conservatives made it a key plank of the election manifesto last year.

The government also promised not to grab ring-fenced aid money when it merged the foreign and development ministries earlier this year. But Sunak on Sunday told Sky News the UK was under “enormous pressure and stress” and faced an “economic shock”.

Any cut—even a temporary one—is likely to trigger a battle with Conservative MPs.

Tom Tugendhat, who chairs parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, wrote in The Times: “If we cut aid we'll fall behind.” He retweeted Yousafzai's message, saying the UK needs “others to join us” as other G7 nations spend less on foreign aid. — AFP

Nearly 100 whales die after mass stranding in NZ

WELLINGTON: About 100 pilot whales and bottlenose dolphins have died in a mass stranding on the remote Chatham Islands, about 800 km (497 miles) off New Zealand's east coast, officials said yesterday. Most of them were stranded during the weekend but rescue efforts have been hampered by the remote location of the island.

New Zealand's Department of Conservation (DOC) said in total 97 pilot whales and three dolphins died in the stranding, adding that

they were notified of the incident on Sunday.

“Only 26 of the whales were still alive at this point, the majority of them appearing very weak, and were euthanized due to the rough sea conditions and almost certainty of there being great white sharks in the water which are brought in by a stranding like this,” said DOC Biodiversity Ranger Jemma Welch. Mass strandings are reasonably common on the Chatham Islands with up to 1,000 animals dying in a single stranding in 1918.

Mass whale strandings have occurred throughout recorded modern history, and why it happens is a question that has puzzled marine biologists for years. In late September, several hundred whales died in shallow waters off the Australian coast in one of the world's biggest mass whale strandings. — Reuters



Some of the 100 dead pilot whales stranded on New Zealand's remote Chatham Islands, as of the marine mammals beached themselves over the weekend but rescue efforts were hampered by the area's isolated location, about 800 kilometers (500 miles) east of the South Island. — AFP

News in brief

Second wave grips Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: Intensive care units across Pakistan are nearing capacity as a second, deadlier wave of the coronavirus builds momentum and officials struggle to counter public indifference to the pandemic. Several doctors said yesterday that hospitals are having to turn away suspected Covid-19 patients, with the potential for a major health care crisis increasing daily. “The coming two weeks are critical and our situation is going to worsen,” said Qaisar Sajjad, secretary general of the Pakistan Medical Association. “Around 95 percent of the beds are occupied. Only a few hospitals still have capacity—but most of the hospitals are full and refusing to take more patients.” — AFP

China accuses India over app ban

BEIJING: Beijing lashed out at India yesterday after it banned another tranche of Chinese apps for national security reasons, the latest sore point between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. Tensions remain high between Beijing and New Delhi after a deadly June clash in a disputed border area that left 20 Indian soldiers dead and an unspecified number of Chinese casualties. India banned 43 Chinese apps on Tuesday—including some from e-commerce giant Alibaba—for threatening “sovereignty and integrity”. China said it had “serious concerns” about the move. — AFP

China sentences Taiwan professor

BEIJING: China sentenced a Taiwanese professor to four years in jail for spying, officials said yesterday, as tensions between Beijing and Taipei deteriorate further. It comes a month after Shih Cheng-ping, a former chief economist for Chinese conglomerate Huaxia Group, made a televised “confession” on state media. The retired National Taiwan Normal University professor was found guilty by a Chinese court on Tuesday, Beijing's Taiwan Affairs Office said at a press briefing. Shih—who disappeared after travelling to the mainland in August 2018 — was one of several Taiwan residents who appeared on a television program by state broadcaster CCTV in October confessing to spying on the mainland. — AFP

HK leader vows to restore order

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's leader vowed yesterday to restore order to the city's legislature and save its political system from “chaos”, in a key policy speech at a muted gathering of almost exclusively pro-Beijing lawmakers. Chief executive Carrie Lam's annual policy address to the Legislative Council—postponed for more than a month after she was ordered to travel to mainland China for meetings with central government officials—outlines the administration's plans for the city. Hong Kong is ruled under a “One Country, Two Systems” model that allows it to retain a degree of autonomy and some freedoms that are denied to citizens on the authoritarian mainland. — AFP