

Students left under siege as day turned to nightmare / When shots rang out and five were killed around Ramkhamhaeng University last weekend, police were nowhere to be seen during 17 hours of terror

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Phoo, a 31-year-old political science student studying at Ramkhamhaeng University usually keeps her distance from both sides of Thai politics. But last Saturday, her friends urged her to join the anti-government rally outside the campus. "Come on, don't be chicken," a friend said to Phoo. "It's not like someone is going to kill us there." Phoo, who lives across the road from the campus, thought she would go for a few hours and be back in her room by 8pm or 9pm, as she is most nights when studying. But Phoo would become one of thousands of students trapped on campus for 17 terrifying hours as street battles raged around them and shots were fired from a freeway flyover, and, some students and teachers claim, from snipers hiding in university buildings. Officials have so far confirmed that five people died during and after the siege of Saturday night and Sunday morning. Interviews by Spectrum have confirmed violent battles between the students and armed red shirt supporters who were gathering for a mass rally of 70,000 people to show support for the embattled government of Yingluck Shinawatra at Rajamangala National Stadium, which is next to the university campus. While reporters and television news crews openly witnessed and recorded the street skirmishes between the students and red shirts on Saturday afternoon as government supporters travelled to the stadium, little has been revealed about what happened later that night. Spectrum has learned that there were bloody confrontations in Ramkhamhaeng Soi 24 behind the university and stadium as red shirts, at least half a dozen believed to be armed, and students carrying bats and rocks attacked each other. Our team was also told of how men in police uniforms stood idly by as the fighting took place. A 29-year-old Cambodian worker living in a small tin worker's shed under the stairs of a stadium under construction at the university, was unlucky enough to be struck by a stray bullet, but Spectrum was told by other workers at the site that bullets had penetrated their tin sheds and they showed us the bullet holes as proof. As the violence raged and the majority of students sought haven inside the university, it still remains a mystery as to why the police refused to answer a request for help from the university's rector, Assoc Prof Wuthisak Larpcharoensap, or why the organisers of the red shirt rally were allowed to stage the event at the stadium when it was public knowledge that many Ramkhamhaeng students and academics are antagonistic towards the government. For Ramkhamhaeng students such as Phoo, who was listening to anti-government speeches from a stage set up inside the university square, things were proceeding with decorum until about 7pm. "I started to hear the guns and the bombs," she said. "The students started to scream. I was terrified and thought about running back home. "But there were many young students there and they were even more panicked than me. I felt sorry for them so I stuck around to help." Students injured off-campus were taken to the area near the stage and Phoo and others cleaned their wounds as the night wore on and more casualties arrived. "I used Facebook, Twitter and all kinds of social media to ask for more medical supplies from people outside as I heard that no ambulances could get near the area. First aid supplies ran out quickly, but luckily a rescue team gave us some more when they came in to take the injured students to nearby hospitals." For 17 hours the students endured the ordeal. It only ended when soldiers arrived around noon on Sunday and allowed them to leave the campus, many of them wearing flak jackets provided by the military. "I heard that soldiers were coming to help us, I felt so relieved," Phoo said. "I knew that everyone would be safe. So I decided to get out from the university around 11am and managed to get back to my condo safely."

Spoiling for a Fight

Apemuk Sinchai, 35, who is studying education at Ramkhamhaeng, said tensions between students and red shirts at the stadium had been brewing since the previous Wednesday. Mr Apemuk, who once headed the San Saeng Thong student party at the university, said a group of younger students were attacked and abused after returning from an anti-government rally at

Democracy Monument and street vendors and food sellers had also earned the ire of the red shirts. "Anyone with a whistle around their necks can become a red shirt target," said Mr Apemuk, referring to the anti-government protest action of "blowing the whistle" at the Yingluck government which opponents claim is a puppet of ousted former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The campus rumour mill went into overdrive when three students returning from the rally at Democracy Monument were hauled into Wang Thonglang police station and tested for drugs and searched for weapons. Even though police found nothing, they were detained at the station overnight and until the afternoon of the following day. Further suspicions were to be raised on Thursday, when a banner of images of the symbol of the university, King Ramkhamhaeng, was vandalised. "I got a phone call from students at the university at around 7pm last Thursday," Mr Apemuk said. "They said they were attacked by red shirts and the red shirts cut the image of King Ramkhamhaeng from the banner. For us that was very offensive," he said. By Friday, the situation had reached boiling point when there were reports that a female student had been slapped by a red shirt guard near the university.

Bring it on

Assistant National Police chief Pol Gen Jaramporn Suramaneer said the student leaders started to gather in front of the university two days before the violent clashes. They were mobilising the students, accusing the red shirts of attacking Ramkhamhaeng students. Confrontations between the two groups occurred sporadically but there was no violence, Pol Gen Jaramporn said. Late on Saturday morning, police say a group of the students smashed a Toyota Fortuner in Ramkhamhaeng Soi 65 as they believed it belonged to red shirts. In the late afternoon, a few hundred students had gathered in front of the main gates near the clock tower by Ramkhamhaeng Road. Some stood under trees to avoid the scorching sun, while others stood in the open, waving Thai flags. On the road, 10 current and former student leaders had turned a truck into a mobile stage from which they delivered anti-government speeches to the crowd, which sporadically booed and jeered. The student leaders slammed red shirt protesters who were gathering in Rajamangala Stadium, one bus stop away, and accused them of disturbing classes at the university. Mr Apemuk, one of the speakers, said after the alleged attacks on students they had sought assurances from local police commanders that they would be safe. At about 4pm, the student leaders invited their rector, Mr Wuthisak, as well as the police commanders of Hua Mak and Wang Thonglang police stations, to a meeting where they read a statement calling on the officers to ensure their safety from the red shirt protesters. They also asked the governor of the Sports Authority of Thailand to review his decision to allow the stadium to host the red shirt rally. But after the letter was handed to the rector and the two police commanders, the other side of the road was plunged into chaos. The students standing in the shade and others on the roadside ran across Ramkhamhaeng Road, crossed over the steel barrier dividing the road and began shouted abuse. Pickup trucks carrying red shirt protesters were the target. By 5pm, the truck used as a makeshift stage had left and the situation descended into violence. Spectrum witnessed students armed with wooden sticks and clubs, rocks, chunks of cement and iron bars attacking the red shirt vehicles. Student leaders tried to persuade the students to retreat to the university compound. The main gates were open, but several students, mostly young men in jeans and black T-shirts were still patrolling on the street. They intercepted motorcycles, cars and others they believed were headed to the stadium. One elderly couple on a motorcycle was asked to make a U-turn when the students noticed they were wearing red T-shirts under their shirts. At about 6pm, a group of students attacked a public bus they believed had red shirts on board, shattering windows and terrifying passengers with rocks and chunks of concrete. A few gunshots were heard as the bus drove away. The situation was out of hand as bystanders sought sanctuary inside shops. The students set up a roadblock to check on red shirts at Thep Leela intersection and another near the stadium. A 500m section of Ramkhamhaeng Road was empty of traffic, falling silent as the street lights flickered on. No police were present despite the unstable situation. By 7pm, a few thousand students were scattered around Phor Khun Ramkhamhaeng square inside the university. Young male students armed with sticks and clubs,

and under control of the student leaders who had resumed their speeches inside the campus, were appointed security guards. But at the back entrance of the university, in Ramkhamhaeng Soi 24, more than 100 students had gathered.

You're on your own

The students and teachers sheltering inside the campus had little idea of what was going on outside the gates. All they were aware of from about 7pm was shots being fired into the compound and the sounds of explosions, most likely ping-pong bombs. To add to the dramatic situation, a helicopter shining a spotlight passed overhead, fuelling some students' fears that they were being shot at from the air. "From time to time, we saw the helicopter fly over the university with a big spotlight shining on us," said Phoo. "After it had gone, there were the sounds of gunshots and bombs going off." Despite the precarious situation inside the university, police refused to come to the rescue. Two patrol cars were stationed on a freeway flyover where students and teachers thought shots were being fired from. "The situation was very severe," Pol Col Narongrit Promsawat, the superintendent of Hua Mak police station, said. "We couldn't get inside as it was dangerous; four police officers were hurt, a police car was hit and we could not specify which side did that." Mr Wuthisak said he did not want the student leaders to rally inside the campus, but opened the gates after the earlier scuffles on Ramkhamhaeng Road. He said after the letter from the student leaders asking for the police to protect them was handed over to the two officers, he had no idea where the police commanders went. As more gunshots were heard during the night, Mr Wuthisak tried to contact police officers to come and help the students, but to no avail. At about 11pm, he tried again after he heard gunshots and ping-pong bomb explosions from the flyover in front of the university. "At this point, I called [Deputy Prime Minister] Pol Gen Pracha Promnok for help," Mr Wuthisak said. "The police officers at Rajamangala said they would come immediately. "I waited for them at the main gate for around 15 minutes. However, he phoned me later telling me that they could not come because of the confrontations in Soi 24. So, I said never mind, and from that point on, I knew that we had to take care of ourselves." Pol Gen Pracha, head of the Centre for the Administration of Peace and Order (Capo) at the time, sent two police patrol cars to be stationed on the flyover, but no police officers were seen by Spectrum inside the campus.

Back street brawl

The main back gate to the university was closed, but a small side gate was open, giving students access to Ramkhamhaeng Soi 24, which runs along the back of the campus and the stadium, and is home to many small shops. It was this small gate that a group of students armed with clubs and steel bars used to enter the soi and confront a group of red shirts, according to photographers and journalists at the scene. However, after four or five gunshots were heard, the students retreated onto the campus. At about 8pm, a Cambodian woman in tears walked onto campus from the building site for the university's new stadium. She asked the media for help, saying her husband had been shot in the back and was lying in the rear of the building. His fellow construction workers told Spectrum they were taking a rest when several bullets hit their makeshift camp, forcing them to flee back inside the building. Spectrum revisited the site and saw bullet fragments and four or five spots on the cement bases of the workers' camp that appeared to have been caused by gunfire. The Cambodian, who survived, was the first gunshot victim in Soi 24. A shop owner in the soi who witnessed the fights, said students had tried to block red shirts getting to the stadium via the back street as Ramkhamhaeng Road was closed. The university lights were turned off, causing the soi to be dimly lit. She also claimed she saw men in police uniforms firing shots. "I saw police in uniform shoot at two students," she said. "Their friends took them away and I heard afterwards that they were severely injured." She said that wafter the first two students were shot, the two groups kept fighting. She said the students were armed with clubs, bricks and stones while many of their opponents had guns. "More than 90% of gunshots were from the red shirts," she said. "After the red shirt group couldn't get inside the stadium, more people from inside came out to help. Then the students were confronted on both

sides, so they had to retreat back inside the university and lock the gate." She said after the students retreated a group of red shirts and men in black fired into the university grounds. She also claimed to have witnessed the murder of a student. "The student was standing alone during the attack, he was hit by a group of red shirts then shot dead." One local man, Paisit, said he was sitting in a restaurant when he witnessed red shirts firing on the students. "I could see four people holding guns just near the restaurant," he said. "One of those started shooting at two students. "There were some police officers standing in the area but they did nothing." He said that initially there was an announcement from the Ramkhamhaeng students urging them not to be rash as they had no weapons for protection. "The Ramkhamhaeng students were besieged by red shirts," he said. "The weapons the students had were wooden clubs. After that there were four people injured. Some of them had severe injuries _ I'm not sure whether they survived or not." The next day, he and his friends collected 9mm shells in the area. He is convinced the students were unarmed. Another witness in Soi 24 told Spectrum a "long convoy" of police cars arrived at around midnight after a number of people were already dead. A security guard at a clothing shop on the soi said the students had antagonised the red shirts all night. He said he heard explosions that he believed were fire crackers being thrown at the red shirts. He and seven other security guards were told to stay inside the building and protect it. However, he says they observed events through a large shop window. "Some of the angry red shirts attacked the students in the morning," he said. "I think it is because the students goaded them for the whole night. Still, the students were lucky. If all the red shirts from the stadium came out it would have been much worse." He said he was also worried by talk that soldiers or police had shot one of the students. He said the security guards inside the clothing shop were apprehensive, but the students did not retaliate. "It made me afraid they would mistake my uniform for that of a policeman or soldier as it looks similar to the border patrol uniform," he said. "We all had to change into casual clothes for safety reasons." Hua Mak station's Pol Col Narongrit said police did not fire any shots and only used riot shields for crowd control. "It was risky to use weapons with people there," he said. "There was the possibility of making a mistake and making the situation worse." He said they tried to keep the warring factions apart and also suggested a number of vocational students, some of whom have a reputation for street violence, had joined the Ramkhamhaeng university students. "We're trying to see which institution it was, but there were not only Ramkhamhaeng students in the group," he said. Pol Col Narongrit said four officers stationed in front of the university were injured during the fights, while a police car at the back of the university was damaged "when it tried to get to the centre of the attack".

Dangerous Dawn

Mr Wuthisak slept in his office and awoke at about 6am on Sunday. He said he did not see any police cars on the flyover and walked towards the fence in front of the university. However, the morning silence was broken by the sound of gunshots and he retreated to the back of the building housing his office where he heard more shots and saw his students crying for help. Several had been shot. He used the university's public address system to order students scattered around the campus to move inside the buildings. Mr Wuthisak again contacted police. He waited until 10am for them to arrive, but after they failed to show up for a second time he contacted the military for help. "Considering what happened in the morning, my staff and I wished to move the students out of the compound as quickly as possible because if we were still in the compound, more attacks were likely," Mr Wuthisak said. About 150 military officers were sent in to help the students in the afternoon and the evacuation of students was completed a few hours later. The rector then left the compound with his staff and declared the temporary closure of the university. "You ask whether or not the students have something to do with the ongoing protests outside," he said when asked what role the students played in baiting the red shirts into violent reprisal. "I would say some of the students have been joining the protests, but here it is very clear that what they demanded has nothing to do with the ongoing political situation," he said. "They just wanted to protect the university's dignity." Phoo said inside the campus there were no more attacks after midnight, but at around 6am there were shots heard at the front gate of the

university. "During the night, most of the gunshots were from the back of the university, but in the morning it sounded like it was happening right next to us," she said. She said the students' sense of security quickly disappeared during the morning as they waited for police to arrive. She said they were given assurances by local people that if the situation worsened they could seek shelter in their homes. "The villagers who live in the area are mostly Muslim, and they were very nice to us," she said. "They told us that if anything happens while we are escaping, we can run into anyone's house and they would be happy to offer us shelter. I feel lucky I made it out alive." A vendor from Soi 24 said the red shirts were bent on revenge in the morning, even attacking local residents. "There were plenty of them on the street when a local rode his motorcycle past," he said. "I heard them shout loudly 'Rush to the front of Ramkhamhaeng.' "They stopped him and destroyed the motorbike. I don't know why they did that. Everyone around there [in the early morning] ran away as the red shirts seemed to attack everyone, even locals beside the road."

The Aftermath

Five people are confirmed to have died in the conflict, three of those identified as red shirts. Organisers of the red shirt rally at Rajamangala stadium claim two of their supporters were shot in or around the stadium, one by a sniper hiding on the university campus. Viroj Khemnakh, 43, and Visanu Phaophu, 26, were shot dead on Sunday morning, and the Senate committee on human rights is investigating the killings. Off-duty soldier Pte Thanasit Viengkham, 22, was pronounced dead on Monday after he fell into a coma after a gunshot to the head sustained at around 2am on Sunday, on Ramkhamhaeng Soi 24. Thanasit's uncle said his nephew was a regular attendee of the 2010 red shirt rallies. "On Saturday night, when there was a call for volunteers to patrol the stadium and guard tens of thousands of us inside, many young folks such as vocational students and ordinary people like Mr Thanasit offered to do so," said Thanasit Viengkham. The charred bones found in the burned bus outside the campus could be the remains of Suradet Khampaengjai, a 17-year-old student of Bangkapi Technology College, who disappeared on Sunday. Relatives believe a ring, key and belt buckle found on the bus are his. A friend of Suradet's said that Suradet and another person rode a motorcycle from Ekamai Soi 30 to the stadium on Sunday afternoon where they were attacked with a ping-pong bomb. The two rushed to hide on the bus, which was damaged and parked nearby. The friend said he heard someone shout "fire", so he fled the bus and lost contact with Suradet. The only student confirmed dead is Thaweesak Phokaew, 21, who was shot dead by an unidentified gunman in Soi 24 at about 8pm on Saturday. A total of 64 people were injured during the confrontations in and around Ramkhamhaeng Road. That the red shirt side suffered three deaths given the multiple accounts of them and men in police uniforms being armed seems unusual. There are accusations from the students and red shirts that provocateurs were on the streets that night changing from casual clothes into police uniforms and black attire. From the accounts of witnesses and police theories, the gunmen who fired the fatal shots were familiar with firearms. Initial forensic results show most of the victims were killed at fairly close range with the shooter standing either directly in front of or behind the victims. Pol Gen Jaramporn says an initial forensic examination of Thaweesak's body indicates he was shot by someone directly in front of him as the bullets ran through his chest horizontally. His body was found slumped in a telephone booth outside the university gate, and police officers collected 11mm bullets from the scene. "The shooting was straight," said Pol Gen Jaramporn. "It suggests that the shooter was precise." Police say they deployed at least three battalions during that night, mainly stationed at the stadium for crowd control. They say they checked protestors at the stadium for weapons and at least two men were arrested. One was found carrying more than 100 rounds for a 9mm gun. Police received a report at 2am on Sunday that a man found at the back gate of the stadium in Soi 24 was shot through his helmet. He was sent to a hospital but later died. Again, the bullet entry was horizontal. Police have asked for the bullet from the hospital for further forensic examination to determine the type of gun used. They have already collected .22 calibre casings from near where the man's body was found. The victim is likely to be the off-duty soldier who died in hospital on Monday. Police also received a report at around 4am that a body had been discovered in the stadium. Viroj Khemnakh was shot in the

chest when he was walking from the stadium to the toilet. Pol Gen Jaramporn said the bullet entry point suggested Viroj was shot from the opposite side of the stadium, which Ramkhamhaeng University is located behind. Visanu Phaophu was shot at around 6.30am on Sunday as he was heading home. Police said witnesses said he had been chased by a group of people after exiting Gate 1 at the stadium. Based on the entry angle of the bullet, they believe he was standing on the pavement and the shooter was on the road. He was shot in the chest by a 9mm gun from close range, police said. Pol Gen Jaramporn said the police conducted a search in several locations around Ramkhamhaeng University where the clashes were reported and around the stadium. They found at least 34 bullet casing of seven different types. "There were certainly more than seven guns used in this incident," said Pol Gen Jaramporn. He declined to comment on whether there were snipers in the university as claimed by the university's executives. Police say they have six criminal cases; four involve the killings, the other two involve property damage to a bus and a van. "We will not rush to conclude the cases but let the evidence, as well as the witnesses, show what happened. We're trying our best to investigate, both by conducting forensic examinations and questioning witnesses before issuing any arrest warrants." But one red shirt supporter who was at Rajamangala stadium said they were told the students were armed and attacking the red shirts trying to get to the venue. When she left the stadium at about 8pm to buy food she heard an explosion and gunshots. She said a security guard told all red shirts to retreat into the stadium. "I wasn't panicking," she said. "I joined the rally in 2010 and I experienced worse. So I didn't try to rush back to the stadium _ I walked around the area to observe the situation. "That's when I heard over the security guard's walkie-talkie a man saying that a fellow red shirt had been shot dead at the back of Ramkhamhaeng University, around Soi 24." She said she walked back into the stadium to tell her grandmother the news but someone had already made the announcement from the stage. "No one knows who shot the red shirt supporter," she said. "But the man on stage said that a man in a black T-shirt with a Thai flag ribbon tied around their head shot the red shirt. "I heard it from other protesters that these men in black T-shirts have guns. Our unarmed guards fought back with just rocks and clubs. The guards managed to get four of the men in black shirts for questioning but they would not say who hired them," she said. She said the stadium was surrounded by students, or people claiming to be students, and the red shirts stayed inside until morning. "Ten red shirts tried to leave the stadium because they were scared, but they were stopped by a group of students and beaten up," she said. "They came back with bruises and one had a broken collar bone from the attack."