

International

Specter of university massacre looms over Thai student protests

October 6, 1976 one of the darkest days in country's history

BANGKOK: Relentless gunfire, lynched bodies, frenzied mobs—the horrific violence Krisadang Nutchart witnessed at Thammasat University more than 40 years ago propelled him into a legal career now spent defending Thailand's young pro-democracy activists.

Like many survivors, he regards October 6, 1976, as one of the darkest days in his country's history, when security forces and royalist militias murdered dozens of youngsters in the middle of Bangkok.

"It wasn't an equal battle—it was a massacre. The students didn't fight back, we didn't have guns," Krisadang tells AFP. "It is a lesson I will never forget."

Today, the 62-year-old represents two prominent faces of a new youth-led movement against the kingdom's military-aligned government—human rights lawyer Anon Numpu and activist Panupong Jadnok. The duo are facing sedition charges after calling for reforms to the kingdom's powerful monarchy in massive demonstrations.



Students want answers

The latest rally drew 30,000 protesters in the biggest public gathering Thailand has seen in years. The growing momentum of the protests—peaceful so far—has nevertheless raised the haunting memories of 1976 in Krisadang's mind.

"I have to teach the younger generation not to underestimate the military because they are merciless," he says. The kingdom has long seen an interminable cycle of political violence and short-lived civilian governments bracketed by military coups.

But the Thammasat massacre stands out for its brutality against students, who had been protesting for weeks against an ousted dictator's return to the country

from exile. Security forces and royalist mobs shot, beat and stabbed students around the campus, while others were strung up from trees.

Officially, 46 protesters were killed, though survivors believe the true toll was more than 100. No official has ever been held accountable for the bloody event.

Shots, grenades

Seared in Krisadang's memory are snapshots of state violence—his friend's body dragged across the football pitch, a student shot dead before his eyes and his desperate dive into the Chao Phraya river to escape. Students assumed the riverside campus was a "safe haven" for their daily protests, he says.

But it was surrounded by troops and royalist mobs spurred on by radio broadcasts casting the protesters as communist insurgents bent on toppling the monarchy. At dawn, Krisadang remembers a grenade landing in the football field, instantly killing students. The military-led regime that later seized power claimed the students fired first—something protesters have always denied.

Krisadang escaped by the skin of his teeth, crawling through the campus to avoid gunfire before launching himself into the river and swimming to a nearby pier. "I got help from locals who gave me shelter for four hours and a new set of clothes," he says.

For Thais who lived through this period, the topic remains sensitive and is not openly discussed, which academics say is a product of the establishment's whitewashing of history. But the murkiness surrounding the incident—and Thailand's recurrent inability to sustain a democratically elected government—has bolstered the demands of a new generation demanding an end to the kingdom's perceived culture of impunity. "The stronger the action to bury and conceal a shameful event, the greater the buoyancy of the subject," says Thai-American writer Pitchaya Sudbanthad, whose novel "Bangkok Wakes to Rain" deals with the trauma of the Thammasat massacre.

He believes youngsters today share "the same desire for a functional, progressive democracy as that of the students in the 1970s".



BANGKOK: Students looking at displays about the Thammasat University massacre at an exhibition commemorating the event at the university in Bangkok. The October 6, 1976 Thammasat massacre stands out for its brutality by security forces and royalist militias against the pro-democracy students, who had been demonstrating for weeks over the return of an ousted ex-dictator from exile. — AFP

Answers?

Besides calling for the resignation of premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha, a former military chief who masterminded the country's most recent coup in 2014, protesters are questioning the monarchy's role in the kingdom—a taboo subject because of royal defamation laws. "The students want answers to questions that mainstream history does not have," academic Puangthong Pawakapan said.

She co-founded an online archival project documenting the October 6 tragedy, which has seen a surge of new visitors in recent months. "With the new technology, the state and the government cannot monopolize history anymore," she says.

Students onstage now repeatedly invoke October 6 to rouse demonstrators in speeches and protest songs. One recurring ballad is penned by Jin Kammachon, a

survivor of the massacre, whose stirring lyrics read: "Let me offer my life, no matter how many times I die."

Krisadang says he is happy to stay out of the limelight and let the country's youth steer the country's future. "They are doing a better job than my generation," Krisadang says. "But the road to democracy is still long and they must be strong." — AFP

News in brief

Malaysia PM quarantines

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin yesterday said he will self-quarantine for 14 days after a minister who attended a high-level government meeting to discuss coronavirus developments on Saturday tested positive for COVID-19. The Southeast Asian country has seen a steady climb in cases in the past week in the aftermath of an election in the state of Sabah in Borneo on Sept 26. Authorities in Malaysia have warned that coronavirus restrictions may have to be reimposed if the trend continues, amid popular anger towards politicians who have been blamed for the spike. In a statement, Muhyiddin confirmed that Religious Affairs Minister Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri had tested positive, and that those identified as close contacts at Saturday's National Security Council meeting to discuss COVID-19 had been issued a 14-day home surveillance order starting Oct 3. — Reuters

Pacific forum crisis

KOROR, Palau: The leaders of five Micronesian nations have threatened to withdraw from the Pacific Islands Forum unless they get to choose the head of the regional grouping, risking instability in an area where China is vying for influence. The Micronesian heads, who do not share a unified stance on Beijing, argue it is their turn to select the PIF secretary-general under an informal arrangement that has stood for decades. But several high-profile candidates from elsewhere in the Pacific have also nominated, including former Cook Islands prime minister Henry Puna. The five leaders—from Palau, the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) — say they will walk if their wishes are not met. — AFP

Singapore plan sparks fears

SINGAPORE: Singapore hopes to start "cruises to nowhere" in a bid to revive its coronavirus-hit tourism industry, but critics warned yesterday against a risky move that could spark COVID-19 outbreaks. The global cruise industry has largely ground to halt due to virus-related travel restrictions, and following a series of outbreaks on packed vessels. But the tourism board in Singapore, a key port and transport hub in Asia, is holding talks with cruise lines on putting on voyages that depart from and return to the city-state. Officials will put in place "appropriate measures that will enable cruises to resume in a safe manner," the board's cruise director Annie Chang said. She did not say when the cruises might start. — AFP

Paris shuts bars over virus

PARIS: Bars and cafes in Paris, placed on maximum coronavirus alert yesterday, will be shuttered for two weeks under new measures to fight the rapid spread of the epidemic, but restaurants will remain open, officials said. With the rate of new infections, hospitalizations and deaths accelerating months after the lifting of a nationwide lockdown, new rules on social distancing will enter into force starting Tuesday. "These are braking measures because the epidemic is moving too fast," Paris police chief Didier Lallemand told journalists. — AFP



TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga (left) gestures with Komeito Party leader Natsuo Yamaguchi during the party's convention in Tokyo in this September 27, 2020 file photo. — AFP

Japan's Suga defends rejection of scholars for science panel

TOKYO: Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, under fire for rejecting six scholars for membership of a science advisory panel, defended the move yesterday amid growing criticism that it violated the constitution's principle of academic freedom.

Suga, who took office last month after Shinzo Abe resigned, has enjoyed high support among voters who approve of his promises to deregulate, reduce mobile phone rates and digitalize services as he tries to revive the economy and rein in COVID-19. But his rejection of the six candidates — some of them known for past criticism of Abe's policies — could stoke a furor that threatens his honeymoon with voters.

At issue is the influential 210-strong Science Council of Japan (SCJ), set up after World War Two to provide independent scientific input for policy. The six were among 105 scholars recommended for membership of the panel, which chooses half its members every three years.

Policies they criticized include Abe's reinterpretation of Japan's pacifist constitution to let troops fight overseas in a historic shift for defense policy, and a 2013 state secrets act that sparked concern over media freedom. Opposition parties have attacked the decision and demanded a public explanation from Suga, critics have taken to social media and a Change.org petition urging the appointments drew more than 100,000 signatures by yesterday evening.

In a group interview with domestic media, Suga repeated that the decision was legitimate, adding that the Council received annual public funds of 1 billion yen (\$9.47 million). He declined to comment on individual cases but said the decision was "totally unrelated to academic freedom," and had nothing to do with scholars' positions on government-backed legislation.

Since 1983, the prime minister has appointed members based on SCJ recommendations, and there is no precedent for rejecting them, political analysts said. "The constitution of Japan has a specific article just for academic freedom, which is ... a direct result of wartime control of academia and science by the militarists," said Sophia University professor Koichi Nakano.

The council, which tangled with Abe's government in 2017 after taking a skeptical stance to academic research with potential military uses, has demanded that Suga explain his decision and appoint the six. "I don't know at all why I was not appointed," one of the six, Masanori Okada, a professor at Waseda Law School, told Reuters. — Reuters

Eight killed in attack targeting Afghan governor

JALALABAD: A suicide attack targeting an Afghan provincial governor killed at least eight people yesterday, officials said, as the president travelled to Qatar where peace talks with the Taliban have stalled. Twenty eight people were wounded when the attacker rammed his explosives-filled vehicle into the convoy of Rahmatullah Yarmal, the governor of eastern Laghman province.

"The governor was driving to his office when his car was hit. Four of his bodyguards and four civilians were killed, 28 wounded," the governor's spokesman Assadullah Daulatai told AFP, adding that the governor was unhurt. Interior ministry spokesman Tareq Arian confirmed the attack and said most of the wounded were civilians. It comes as President Ashraf Ghani on Monday left for Doha to meet with Qatari officials, three weeks after the launch of landmark peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Ghani will first stop in Kuwait to offer condolences over the death of emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, his spokesman Sediq Sediqqi said. Talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government negotiators, aimed at ending Afghanistan's 19-year conflict, have stalled over disagreements on how to

Wildfires raze dozens of homes in New Zealand

WELLINGTON: Wildfires have destroyed up to 50 homes in New Zealand, authorities announced yesterday, saying it was a miracle no one was hurt as "a wall of orange" razed most of a remote South Island village. The blaze began in a mountain forest early Sunday morning and, fanned by strong winds, swept through the village of Lake Ohau, forcing residents to flee for their lives.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) said the unpredictable winds made fighting the fire "challenging" and by yesterday afternoon it had burned 4,600 hectares (18 square miles) of land.

Waitaki District mayor Gary Kircher said the tiny Lake Ohau community had been devastated. "Of the 60 or 70 houses, we believe that the majority have gone," he told Radio New Zealand.

"The reality is that it's a minor miracle no one has been harmed. If it had been another 15-20 minutes it would have been a very different story." Kircher described how residents awoke to find an inferno bearing down on them. "I talked to a gentleman who got up to his dog (barking) in the early hours, opened his door and there was this wall of orange," he said.

"He was the one that set off the town fire alarm and helped to wake people... there's certainly some scary tales about how close it came to being an absolute disaster with fatalities."

Wildfires are relatively common on the South Island at this time of the year but the scale and intensity of the Ohau fire have been unusual.

'War zone'

Village resident Hugh Spiers, who lost his home, said the ferocious blaze was "surreal" and more akin to the huge bushfires that regularly erupt in Australia



Afghan security forces remove a damaged police vehicle at the site of a car bomb attack that targeted Laghman provincial governor's convoy, in Mihtarlam, Laghman Province yesterday. — AFP

frame a code of conduct that will guide the broader talks. The Taliban, who are Sunni hardliners, are insisting on adherence to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, but the government negotiators say this could be used to discriminate against Hazaras, who are predominantly Shia, and other minorities in the country. Another contentious topic is how the US-Taliban deal will shape a future peace deal and how it will be referred to. No one has so far claimed responsibility for the Laghman attack, but the Taliban are active in the region.

On Saturday, a suicide bomber detonated a vehicle full of explosives at the entrance an administrative building in eastern Nangarhar province, killing 15 people, mostly civilians, officials said. — AFP



New Zealand Defense Force firefighters combat the Richmond fire near Nelson, New Zealand. — Reuters

than a regular New Zealand blaze. "The wind was so strong and the flames and the smoke and the sparks and the embers, it was just like what you see in the bush fires in Australia," he told TVNZ. By yesterday afternoon the fire front had moved far enough from the village to allow evacuated residents a brief trip back to assess the damage.

Civil Defence Minister Peeni Henare, who accompanied them, described seeing burned out cars and gutted homes. "The term I've heard used to describe it is a war zone," he told reporters.

"It's clear to me that there's no rhyme or reason when it comes to fire, one house is affected, the neighbor isn't... you can feel a sense of loss." FENZ said 11 helicopters and eight fire crews were attempting to contain the flames. It said investigators were examining the cause of the blaze, amid reports it was ignited by an electrical arc from overhead power lines.

With light rain forecast for the next 24 hours, there were hopes it would be under control by Tuesday night. New Zealand this year experienced its warmest winter on record, which government science body NIWA said was consistent with a long-term trend of rising temperatures linked to climate change. — AFP