

Opposition to Military Coup in Khon Kaen

KHON KAEN– On May 24, the second full day after the overthrow of the caretaker government by a military coup, there was a greater military presence in Khon Kaen, as well as signs of resistance to the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). In the span of three hours, at least three independent anti-coup activities took place around Khon Kaen, including two at Central Plaza shopping mall and one at Khon Kaen University.



At 5:15 p.m., an anti-coup protestor unveiled a banner reading, “No to the Coup Constitution of 2007. Bring Back the 1997 Constitution.” It was quickly confiscated.

On May 23, it was reported that about 100 soldiers were visible midday at key intersections of the city. Yesterday, military security appeared to be significantly heightened, with as many as an estimated 500 soldiers in the city and

almost 100 posted outside of Central Plaza alone.

At approximately 5 p.m. on May 24, witnesses say a student group was halted by the authorities at Central Plaza. At least six of the students were reportedly detained. Shortly after, a loud altercation between two female activists and military authorities ensued, attracting a large crowd of onlookers inside the front entrance. The incident only quieted down after officials assured the activists that the students had been released.

At that same moment, another group of protesters attempted to unroll an anti-coup banner reading, "No to the Coup Constitution of 2007. Bring Back the 1997 Constitution." Military officials wrestled the banner away from protesters and confiscated it.

One onlooker shook her head and said, "The coup will never end, it has happened more than fifteen times [in Thailand] already."

Ms. Suratda, a thirty-seven-year-old small business owner, expressed frustration, saying that she thought a lot of people in Khon Kaen are unhappy about the coup but are too afraid to come out.

Ms. Chawthip, a forty-nine-year-old owner of a tutoring center, said, "I don't like the coup." More people would be protesting, she said, but "we are afraid of guns. Soldiers have guns, but the people don't."

Military officials at the scene refused to make any comment to The Isaan Record.

A second protest group relocated to a restaurant in the mall where they displayed a sign that read, "Get out military, give back democracy." This declaration led military authorities to rush and intervene. A protest leader refused to accompany authorities for talks elsewhere, prompting a military official

to sit with the leader at an adjoining table in the restaurant.

A member of this group said their protest was to bring back democracy. "Our demand is for elections and equality of all votes regardless of who the person is. We don't want a constitution that further limits democracy. The people have to be the sovereign power."

A third group had travelled down from Namphong District and had planned to assemble at the park across from Central Plaza. They were unable to carry out their demonstration due to confusion between the various protest groups. The leader of this group said, "The age of dictatorship is over. Any advanced country is democratic, like Japan, Germany, or the US."

Thailand is rated in the top eight countries in the world for number of coups; it is once again caught in the vicious cycle of coups, new constitutions, elections, and now another coup, he explained.

A fourth protest group met at Khon Kaen University's Faculty of Law. It included members of the student activist group Dao Din, as well as several members from the Namphong group. Together they performed a Thai version of The People's Song in front of a bust of Pridi Phanomyong whom they recognize as the "Father of Thai Democracy." The performance was recorded and will be posted on social media outlets.

Mr. Jatupat, a leader of the group, said the goal of the video is to encourage people to be brave. "In this situation, we have to wake up the people; this is a song for those who are oppressed."

There were other signs of opposition to the coup in the city. Along Chonnabot Road outside of Khon Kaen University, one piece of graffiti showed a broken peace symbol and the words, "Resist the Coup." Another said, "MILITARY: Don't Mess [in

politics].”

None of the groups protesting in Khon Kaen seemed to be connected to the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). Many, however, identified themselves as red shirts or as sympathetic to the UDD cause.

There appeared to be little coordination between the groups yesterday. Among those protesting, there was some surprise to see other groups protesting as well.

Yesterday’s anti-coup activities come in the wake of twenty-one people who were arrested for allegedly preparing violent acts in Khon Kaen on May 23, [as reported](#) by the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT).

There is reportedly an anti-coup protest scheduled for 4:30 p.m. in Khon Kaen on May 25.

Gold Mine Protesters Hurt by Armed Mob and Shady Deals



On the night of May 15, 300 armed men allegedly beat and bound forty villagers in Na Nong Bong community in Khao Luang district of Loei province. On the morning of the May 17, police came for the initial investigation of the attack on the community and Tungkum Ltd. mining site.

LOEI– Charging with clubs, broken bottles, slingshots, and guns, approximately 300 masked men descended on Na Nong Bong community at 10 p.m. on May 15, villagers claim. Moving under the cover of darkness, and suspected of cutting power to the village, these men had the tactical edge over community members keeping watch at three checkpoints along the road to a controversial mine in Khao Luang District.

The assailants, whom villagers call “Blackshirts,” allegedly beat and held captive forty members of the Na Nong Bong anti-mining group, People Who Love Their Hometown (PWLTH), for six hours.

One hundred Blackshirts raided each checkpoint, which was staffed by about ten village volunteers, community members

stated. Villagers claim their feet were bound together and their hands tied behind their backs with strips cloth, zip ties, and handcuffs. Images of the wounds show battered faces and limbs. The Environmental Alert and Recovery Thailand (EARTH) activist group reported at least 20 people sustained injuries from the attack.

PWLTH has been protesting Tungcum Ltd.'s mining operation near their village since 2008 due to the mine's alleged environmental and health effects.

After six years of protesting against Tungcum Ltd., PWLTH ramped up their strategy against the mining company as a response to being excluded from a public hearing event in September 2013. In October 2013, PWLTH installed three checkpoints for monitoring the operations around the Tungcum Ltd. mine site.

At the final checkpoint, villagers constructed a blockade in an intersection between a public road and Tungcum Ltd.'s access road. The blockade's location in relation to the Tungcum Ltd. property line is in dispute. Mr. Lertsak Khamkongsak, a community organizer working with PWLTH, states the road was built to cease the transportation of illegal ore after the Tungcum Ltd.'s mining license expired at this site. Since then, approximately ten community members have stationed themselves at each checkpoint for nightly shifts of guard duty.

Prachatham reports that Tungcum Ltd. has since filed seven lawsuits against PWLTH, all of which are pending in court. The cases include three criminal cases of alleged trespassing on Tungcum Ltd.'s property, three civil cases regarding Tungcum Ltd.'s financial losses due to blocked access to the mine, and one case for building an obstruction on the road. In total, Tungcum Ltd. is suing the villagers for over 270 million baht plus 10 million baht per day since September.

Once the checkpoints were secured, the Blackshirts bulldozed the blockade obstructing access to the Tungcum Ltd. mine site. Over the next six hours, the unknown assailants worked to move thirteen trucks full of ore out of the Tungcum Ltd. mine, claim witnesses.

Tungcum Ltd. did not respond to requests for comment.

At 4 a.m., after the last truckload of ore exited the mine, captives and eyewitnesses reported that Blackshirts began untying the hostages.

Community members say it was clear that the attack had been planned. "They had prepared a strategy, they knew how many people we had at the checkpoints," said Mr. Samai Phakmi, a leader of PWLTH and head of the Subdistrict Administrative Office Council, "The hostages couldn't have asked for help because they had no time. [The Blackshirts] were so organized, they knew how to disable our checkpoints, they knew our leaders, and they knew when to break down the blockade."

Witnesses claim they began calling the police at 10 p.m. on the evening of May 15. It was not until three hours after the initial seizure that two police officers arrived.

However, realizing they were outnumbered, the two police officers reportedly left. At 2 a.m., villagers went to the nearby Wang Saphung police station to report what was happening, but according to PWLTH leaders, police did not arrive to investigate the situation until Saturday morning, thirty-six hours after the initial call from the community.

Mr. Surapan Rujichaiwat, another PWLTH leader, visibly shaken by the events, stated that, "In a situation where the law is being broken, we have to fight to get the police involved. It shouldn't be like that, we shouldn't have to beg for the police to take action."

Mr. Samai adds, "If the tables were turned and we attacked the

company, we would've already been in jail." There has been no confirmation from authorities that the attacks came from Tungcum Ltd.

Mr. Surapan recounts that on the way to his shift at the checkpoint, "They knocked me off of my motorcycle, kicked me in the face, and asked me over and over 'Where are you going? Where are you going?' It was then that I realized my friends were tied up lying face down."

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Mr. Yon Khunna, a leader of the anti-mining group in the Na Nong Bong village area, suffers from blows to the face. He was one of many group leaders who says he was beaten and threatened that night.

At one point, when he was on the ground, Mr. Surapan claims, "One of the Blackshirts said, 'Oh, this is their leader,' and then they started to beat me. They dragged me away from the others and I could hear them counting people by hitting them on their bodies with their wooden clubs."

Mr. Samai stated, "It seemed like we were in a battlefield."

Members of PWLTH also claim they were threatened as they were beaten. Mr. Surapan stated, "They threatened me, told me it's not safe for my wife and kids. They said, 'I know you well, if you keep doing this, it will not be good for your family.'"

Many people who watched the situation unfold felt helpless. "We couldn't do anything," explained Ms. Wiron Rujichaiwat, wife of Mr. Surapan. Disheartened, she continued, "The Blackshirts made it seem like if we attacked them, they would beat or kill those held hostage."

Ms. Wiron sat and gazed at her husband, who was standing near the road. "My husband was captured," she said. "He said he could hear them saying, 'If the people try to charge us, capture them and put them in the trucks, drive away, kill them, and dump the bodies.'"

The most common injuries to those captured were cuts from knives and glass, scrapes, beaten and bruised faces, and one individual reported blood in his urine. Of the forty hostages, seven have filed complaints to the police and only one person could provide the name of an un-masked Blackshirt whom he recognized.

Mr. Surapan explained, around 4 a.m. on May 16, he was untied by a captor who then began to apologize for the violence inflicted upon the community. The captor then attempted to bribe Mr. Surapan. "He offered me a car, money, and a job with [Tungkum Ltd.] if I stopped our protest movement."

For villagers, this has been a serious turn in their battle

against the mining industry. "This conflict is not about making a profit for us, it is about protecting our livelihoods, our food sources, our security... It is not a business conflict, it is about protecting our environment which affects our life, our health, our children, and our family," said Ms. Wiron.

Recently, on April 22, Mr. Surapan stated that a retired high-ranking military official came to his house, allegedly claiming to be a Tungcum Ltd. buyer and asked if the copper ore from the company mining site could be transported. Mr. Surapan deflected the retired military official's request and said that he needed to talk to the members of PWLTH.

Mr. Surapan stated that on May 5, he received another visit from the same retired military official, this time accompanied by his son, again requesting to transport the copper ore. Purportedly, they questioned Mr. Surapan, stating, "We just want to buy the copper, why are you making this so difficult for us?"

Ten days after the last contact with the retired military official and his son, the blockade obstructing Tungcum Ltd.'s mine was torn down and pieces strewn about.



Villagers claim the 300 attackers bulldozed the blockade obstructing the access road of the Tungcum Ltd. mining site and transported thirteen truckloads of minerals.

During the events of May 15, villagers claim that they recognized the retired military official from his previous visits to Na Nong Bong and heard references to his son on walkie-talkies. It is reported by captives that the mask-less retired military official had physical altercations with a villager and his son was controlling the transportation of ore from the mine that night.

“People were mentioning [the retired military officials’ son] on the walkie-talkie the whole night,” stated Mr. Samai. Those uninvolved with the anti-mining movement know little of the son’s identification otherwise.

Mr. Thanawoot Pimsuwan, Head of the Provincial Administrative Office of Loei province, explained that the retired military official’s son came to his office before the Songkran holiday claiming Tungcum Ltd. would make the retired official’s son the Managing Director only if they transported the copper ore

from the site in Na Nong Bong. Mr. Thanawoot advised the son to work through the legal cases with Na Nong Bong by negotiation and more communication with the villagers.

According to the [Asian Human Rights Commission](#), Mr. Thanawoot has appointed himself as a broker to buy copper ore from Tungcum Ltd. Mr. Thanawoot denies this allegation. "Why would I want to be a part of this smuggling business?" he said.

Mr. Thanawoot explained that the moving of minerals from the Tungcum Ltd. site on May 15 is illegal unless the company holds the proper permits from the Mineral Transportation Office.

He urged the villagers to go to the Office of the Governor and request to view the mineral transportation documents to find out if the copper was legally or illegally taken out of the Tungcum Ltd. mine on May 15. Community organizers and members state that the Tungcum Ltd. transportation documents are registered for May 16 and 17, which excludes the transportation of ore from 10 p.m. to 11:59 p.m. on May 15.

"What's going to happen when it happens again? It will when they want more copper," claimed Ms. Wiron. Villagers described a sense of injustice throughout the investigation process and a fear of being ill equipped to handle more violence from gangs and mobs.

She explained, "We have our own way of dealing with finding justice, and it is through the courts, not through violence."

A local community organizer, who asked to remain anonymous for safety reasons, said, "This is a collaboration of three parties that work as an organization. You can't say that this is just the company, or just the gangsters, or just the administrative offices, but it is a conflict over the rights to resources and who will benefit most from them."

Thanawoot, for his part, believes this conflict may be the end for Tungcum Ltd. Shaking his head in disappointment, Mr.

Thanawoot said, “[Tungkum Ltd.] has done itself in through this violence against the community.”
