

Sarah Lipman: Tension grows in Thailand

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BANGKOK -- Things continue to heat up in Bangkok as Prime Minister [Abhisit Vejjajiva](#) continues to turn down propositions to dissolve parliament in three months and the red shirts mobilize further, occupying more areas of the city.

As a result of increasing worries of those living in Thailand and those at home planning trips to Southeast Asia, the U.S. State Department updated its travel alert April 28, advising against "all non-essential travel" to Thailand, citing difficulty in transportation and the indefinite continuation of the protests by the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship. This is a change from its previous advisory against nonessential travel to just the country's capital. In addition, the [U.S. Embassy](#) held a town hall meeting last Monday for American citizens traveling through or living in Bangkok.

The reds have since spread from the commercial district of Siam to the business district of Silom, and even parts of the expatriate community in Sukhumvit. While my area still remains largely unaffected in North Bangkok, aside from the occasional nonviolent "multicolored rally" in Chatujak Park, it is finally starting to take its toll on my mobility within the city.

I decided to attend the meeting -- as a citizen, not press -- to get a better idea of how the embassy and ambassador to Thailand, [Eric G. John](#), are assessing the situation. Though much of the meeting was off the record, it did ease my mind to know that they have publicly stated in messages that the State Department has yet to see a reason to slap a travel ban on the country or urge Americans to leave. Various embassy officials took turns recounting the ongoing situation and explaining the precautions citizens living in Bangkok should take if the situation turned uglier.

Thailand and the United States hold favorable international relations with each other, and I think across the political spectrum -- whether they're red, yellow, black, watermelon or multicolored -- all hope to see that continue.

The adverse affect it is having on the country's image as the Land of Smiles and the economy will only continue to grow, though. As the situation drags on, images of beautiful beaches and street food are



deteriorating and are being replaced with those of soldiers in full-body armor and angered protesters. From 4 billion to 5 billion baht per day is being lost as the situation escalates, and tourism, which constitutes 8 percent of the country's \$630 billion economy, is expected to take a major hit.

It's taken me awhile to really get a grasp on what is going on politically in the country. I've started reading past articles and books about Thailand's volatile political system and how, for years, it has been corrupted through unlawful donations, powerful rulers and money. Since 1932, Thailand has seen 18 coups and protests by yellow shirts and red shirts, even if they have been relatively nonviolent. Up until April 10, the worst political violence the country had seen occurred in 1992.

From 1973 onward, Thailand has seen unstable democracy flecked with intermittent periods of military or civilian rule. The only constant in its political history since 1973 has been change, and that's where the difficulty in creating a more finite solution to its political turmoil lies.

In my research, I've seen a recurring theme of lawlessness in the Thai political system. There needs to be an institution that has not been degraded in which the Kingdom of Thailand can place its trust. Only then can a resolution be found.

Almost everything in Thailand aligns with either the UDD red shirts or the People's [Alliance for Democracy](#)'s yellow shirts. Parliament administration, respect for the media and the judiciary system have all taken severe hits over the last decade, and they should be the institutions that can be trusted.

Both sides need to establish an open dialogue with each other, with a trusted intermediary moderating the conversation. That, however, will remain elusive, and tensions will keep rising the longer people associated with the red-shirt movement lob grenades and radical black shirts threaten violence and the kidnapping of officials. The same goes for the soldiers heeding orders from the government to open fire on protest sites.

I still don't feel embedded in the country and politics enough to take a stance on which side is right or wrong, but I can hope only that it is resolved soon and with as little bloodshed as possible. I have grown to care deeply for Thailand and would like to be able to call it home away from home for years to come.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world. Visit her blog, [Passport: The World](#), at www.stamfordadvocate.com. To read Sarah's blog, go to <http://blog.ctnews.com/lipman>.