

as delivered

**Speech by
His Excellency Abhisit Vejjajiva,
Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand,
at the Council on Foreign Relations
Friday 24 September 2010, New York**

President of the Council on Foreign Relations,

Your Excellencies, Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for this opportunity for me to address the members of the Council, to share with you some thoughts on the situation in Thailand. Last year around this time when I came to New York I spoke at Columbia University on post-crisis Thailand and prospects for building a new democratic society. Then, as now, I said that we were facing huge challenges, as we tried to build upon the foundations of our democracy. I recognised that in riding up to meet these challenges, it would be a long and difficult process. I should confess that at the time I hadn't anticipated the events that that taken place in April and May of this year. Then, as now, and I will surely say to you, that I am confident that Thailand has the character, the will and the determination to get through the challenges that we face, and continue to build a stronger democracy for the future for our children.

The events in April and May would have given you disturbing images, including of course the violence and regrettable losses of lives. But they also serve as a powerful lesson, that when we try to develop a democracy, there will be "clashes of values", and "clashes of opinions". But the key thing of course is that we have to find a way in which we can avoid violence and illegal means by which people attain their political ends or objectives. After going through the difficult two months, the Government is determined to embark upon a process of reform and reconciliation. Not an easy job, and not one that we can find an immediate solution. But what we have tried to do is to reach out all parts of Thai society and to engage them in a process that will build the right values to support stronger democracy. That includes the need to respect the law, good governance, accountability and transparency. And while of course we cannot claim to have returned the situation to complete normalcy, the state of emergency remains in 7 provinces, having been lifted in 17 already, a few more expected to be lifted next week or the week after. But if you are already in Bangkok right now, you'd hardly notice the effect of having the state of emergency in place. Ordinary people are not affected, and you would feel welcome and see the usual smiling faces from the people of Thailand.

As we move ahead, we know we have to tackle a number of issues all at the same time. What I have done is to set up a number of independent

commissions headed by well-respected figures in Thailand, to deal with what I see as the main causes for the conflicts and divisions in our society. The work is underway on investigating what actually took place in April and May, not just by the government commissions but also by the Human Rights Commission and the National Counter-Corruption Commission, both of which are independent bodies under the Thai Constitution. We also have a panel that will look into the issue of Constitutional amendments, and that commission will make recommendations to me towards the end of October or early November. We're also engaging the media, so that they go through a process of reform as well, so that the way they present information and news will retain the freedom of expression but also at the same time acting with responsibility and accountability.

But most important of all, we also have a commission led by former prime minister Anand Panyarachun to look at some of the structural issues which provide one of the root causes for the division that has taken place and the violence we have seen. There is no way that these commissions can complete their work within the next 3 months, 4 months, but they have been instructed, and they have agreed, to try to present some concrete, early results, before the end of the year. At the same time, the political system continues to function. In fact only a week after the events of April and May we managed to pass the first reading of the budget, followed by the opposition submitting a no-confidence motion which the government survived, and at the moment, in a session that will run until the end of the year, we will continue to pass significant legislation and international treaties and agreements, and also allowing the parliamentary system to fully function. There is a weekly question time, which I do personally with the exception of this week, as I have the excuse of being here. We are also beginning to see engagement and dialogue from the opposition, who at first were perhaps suspicious and rejecting the idea of the reconciliation plan, but now making public statements about their desire now to join the process of reconciliation, although of course the details and the means are being agreed upon. I say this because a lot of this gets lost in the noise, with the events and news presented. You can forever engage in debates about details of who did what, who's right, who's wrong.

But the one thing that I can reassure you is that I personally had come through the political system at a very young age, with the conviction and belief in democracy. I am absolutely confident and aware that we really are addressing the real issues that matter to the people. My determination to get the country through this crisis, without caving in to some demands, is proof that we must always put the interests of the people before the interests of one person or one small group. We should never allow the use of force, violence, or intimidation, to affect political changes, which is why all along over the last two years, I have never rejected calls for early elections.

But my conditions that I have set are set with the best of the country's interests.

First, during last year I felt that the country, particularly the Thai economy, needed a strong recovery going. We did that, and the first half of the year saw 10.6 % growth in GDP, and we are expecting the whole year to be close to 8%. Unemployment is just below 1%, inflation is 3.5%, exports growing at around 30% per annum, and we've achieved this without upsetting our longer term solution. The debt-GDP ratio is now stabilizing at around 42-43% and we anticipated at the beginning of the crisis that we will reach 60%. We now feel that it may be below 50%.

The second condition that I have always given importance to relates to the Constitution. There's a lot of misperceptions involving the political troubles arising from a somehow undemocratic process that led to the formation of the current government. That is not true. We had elections about a little over a year after the coup. All parties participated, they knew the rules of the game, which included the possibility of being disbanded if they engage in election fraud. That's what happened. The pro-former prime minister's party won the elections, but also were charged of election fraud and later proven by the Electoral Commission and subsequently by the Constitutional Court. It ruled that they had to be disbanded. So the parliamentary processes completed the change, and the majority of the members of Parliament decided they had enough of two ineffective governments that didn't deliver any results to the people, and decide to switch sides. And we formed the government. The situation that we now face---I don't want to see a repeat where we go to early elections and have the same rules, but the whole experience might be repeated, which would not settle any issue. But most significant of all, I have always said that elections should only take place under peaceful and stable conditions. I don't believe in elections where there continues to be intimidation, threat of the use of force or violence against candidates or parties.

My offer to the red shirts has always been that they must prove that they will create this peaceful environment, and I will return the power to the people, even though I have the right to complete my term right through the beginning of 2012. Last year I made three solid offers of elections, and each time they were rejected by the opposition and the red shirts, which made us question what really was that they wanted to achieve. Be that as it may, I know that people who have joined the red shirt movement, the majority of them do not want to see violence, do not want to use illegal means in voicing their concerns and discontent. But they were exploited by some political leader a therefore led to the political events of April and May. My Government intends to address these issues in a comprehensive manner. Much has been said about taking care of the rural poor. I would only point to the fact that in the last couple of years, this government has done more than any other government in history in trying to solve the problems of the rural poor. We put in place for the first time an income guarantee programme for farmers for two crops.

We have worked on legislation for land and wealth taxes. In six more months, the work of the commissions put in place would set the scene for possible early elections next year. The key interest is to have peaceful continuity and to be on course for a political solution. We aim to have Thailand well placed for the long-term. We have focused on investing in infrastructure for the next 3 years, in roads, rail, water resources and upgrading Thailand's health care system.

There is also the potential of the ASEAN region that Thailand is a part of. By 2015, the ASEAN market will be over 700 million and have a combined GDP of 2 trillion US dollars. ASEAN has the potential as a logistics and tourism hub, and the interest of the US to reengage with ASEAN is very important. The ASEAN-US Leaders Meeting held in New York today attests to the fact that the US is keen to engage with the region, and is the first meeting held in US soil. Thailand is ready to play an active role and have greater responsibility in global issues.

We will address to needs of the large sectors of society that have been neglected, and work towards a fairer and more just society. We believe that the majority of the people are determined to build peace and security. We are confident in the Thai people's resilience, and we have the will, determination, and share the basic philosophy of dynamism and creativity, and we will certainly strive and shine through the challenges ahead. Thank you and Sawasdee Krub.