

# Thai army, protesters foil bid to rescue women, children from conflict

BANGKOK – Anti-government protesters and the Thai army prevented a Catholic-run charity and other nongovernmental organizations from rescuing women and children trapped within a commercial district of central Bangkok as clashes between the two sides escalated.

“We had a meeting with several children’s NGOs in the area to discuss bringing children, women and elderly people in the protest areas to safe places,” an unidentified staff member of the Redemptorist-run Mercy Center told the Asian church news agency UCA News May 17.

“But we found that we could not do that because all entrances were blocked (by the army),” the staff member said.

The staff member added that protest leaders also were approached, “but they did not allow people to be brought out due to the situation of mistrust.”

Fighting between the army and thousands of “red-shirt” protesters – who have been holed up for more than a month in a central commercial district – reignited May 13 when security forces tried to end the occupation.

The renewed violence, which left at least 35 people dead and more than 300 injured, prompted Thai Catholic leaders to issue a plea for calm and a return to negotiations.

The president of the bishops’ conference said he feared “the country is at the beginning of a civil war.”

Archbishop Louis Chamniern Santisukniran of Thare and Nonseng called for negotiations to begin anew, saying that “an intervention of religious leaders might help to explore new avenues of dialogue and mediation and provide a peaceful solution to the crisis,” Fides, the Vatican’s missionary news agency, reported May

15.

A May 17 appeal from the protesters for a cease-fire and U.N.-mediated talks was rejected by authorities.

The recent violence has been the worst since April 10, when 25 people were killed and more than 800 were injured.

In mid-May, women and children took refuge in a Buddhist temple inside a cordoned-off downtown area as the government threatened to launch an assault.

The protest led Catholics to stay away from Mass May 16 at parishes near the protest zone.

"The present political situation has made it very difficult or impossible for many parishioners to attend Sunday Mass," Father Sirichai Laukobkul of Holy Redeemer Church in central Bangkok told UCA News.

"I have been hearing loud explosions and gunfire all the time," he said. "The battle is being fought near our church, with people being injured and killed."

The priest said about 10 people attended each Mass. Normal attendance is about 700 at each liturgy.

During Masses, people prayed for the dead and injured as well as for peace in the country.