



GRAPHIC

Thai military seizes control, spring program still scheduled

The government of Thailand was taken over in a bloodless coup a week ago.

By **CURRY CHANDLER**
ASSISTANT NEWS EDITOR

International Programs officials will not alter its plans to send Pepperdine students to Thailand next semester following the military coup last week.

The Sept. 19 coup occurred while Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was in New York attending a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. It was swift and bloodless, with no reports of casualties.

"We're of course keeping an eye on it," said Dr. Charles Hall, dean of International Programs. "This is probably a coup that is going to be peaceful, remain peaceful and is going to ultimately benefit Thailand."

The uprising was led by Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratglin, commander in chief of the Thai Royal Army. The military regime has enjoyed the blessing of Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the world's longest serving current head of state.

"The coup is peaceful," Hall said. "Most people in Thailand favor what has happened."

This is the first year that Pepperdine has participated in the spring semester in Thailand program, which brings together students from various colleges including California Lutheran University, Messiah College and Westmont College. This year 10 out of the 25 available spaces have been filled by Pepperdine students.

Students live with host families and take Thai language and culture classes at Chiang Mai University. The program also includes internships designed to correlate with each student's major and a month-long stay in a small village to complete an ethnography of the remote site. Students also participate in service-oriented projects such as working at an orphanage.

The semester-long program is directed by Michael Leming, a professor of sociology at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., and has been for the past six years. Following the coup he sent an e-mail to all of the Pepperdine

Coup: Students unphased by revolt

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students enrolled in the program for Spring 2007.

"You will be cared for by your Thai family," Leming wrote in the e-mail. "Thailand is a very safe country that loves Americans." The peaceful coup appears to have left students unshaken.

"Things like this happen over there every decade or so," said Lisa Brooks, a sophomore creative writing major. "Life is continuing as normal in Thailand, people are hopeful and calm."

Brooks is one of the Pepperdine students who will take part in the Spring Thailand program. She is studying in Florence, Italy, and said she first heard about the coup from Leming's e-mail.

"I actually haven't talked with my parents about [the coup]," she said. "I'm pretty sure they think I don't know about it."

Other students have found their parents to be a little more vocal.

"I know my parents were really worried about it when they first heard," said Sara Mark, a sophomore finance major who will be joining Brooks in Thailand next semester. "But it's a relatively peaceful coup and I have seen pictures that lessen any reservations I have about going."

The coup hasn't just affected students who plan to study in the country, but also students who call Thailand home.

"When I found out [about the coup], I was extremely worried about my parents," said Mariam Baim, a senior psychology major whose hometown is Bangkok. "I contacted them immediately and was relieved to find out that the coup had been peaceful."

Despite the lingering fog of war hanging over the country's political future, many people have decided that something good has happened, whatever the end result.

"[Former Prime Minister] Taksin has lost the confidence of the people of Thailand long ago," Leming wrote in his e-mail. "He has manipulated the system for his own ends. Last March when we were there, almost one million people asked that Mr. Taksin step down as Prime Minister."

For the time being, officials at Pepperdine and around the world can only hope that what has so far been a composed and non-violent revolt will remain that way.

"The most important thing is that the king, who is highly revered in Thailand, gave his support to the coup," said Hall, "which almost guarantees that it's going to be peaceful, that it's going to be supportive and that it's going to benefit Thailand."

THAI COUP

The Sept. 19 coup occurred while Thailand's Prime Minister was in New York City for a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly.

The leader of the Thai army spearheaded the revolt, and he is now acting as de facto Prime Minister.

Thailand's King gave the coup his approval, a crucial factor for the Thai people who hold him in very high esteem.

Since 1947 there have been 17 coups in Thailand. Most of them have been bloodless, as this latest one was.