

Stranded tourists try to leave Thailand by Vietnam-era naval base



(Reuters)

Passengers wait at U-Tapao international airport - Thai authorities said flights would leave from the small provincial naval base, in Pattaya

Sian Powell, in Bangkok

Thousands of tourists stranded in Thailand have started to leave the beleaguered nation via a Vietnam War-era naval base, as the country's government continued its desperate efforts to end the airport blockade imposed by anti-government protesters.

As up to 2,000 Britons waited to be flown out of the resort town of Pattaya - with 40 flights scheduled to fly in and out of U-Tapao naval base airport today - militants already occupying both Bangkok airports threatened to launch an operation to shut down the tiny provincial terminal.

With protesters continuing to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat, it emerged that the Thai leader had sacked his national police chief, General Patcharawat Wongsuwanbut, for failing to break three days of blockade that has threatened to cause huge damage to Thailand's previously vibrant business and tourism sectors.

One Briton waiting in Pattaya, Harry Denford, told *The Times* that he had heard that anti-government militants would also move to shut down the U-Tapao naval base. "We were told the yellow shirts were coming," he said. "I don't know if they will be able to take over the base or not."

A spokesman for the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which took possession of Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport on Tuesday, said it was entirely possible that PAD supporters would besiege U-Tapao, as they had Suvarnabhumi and the second Bangkok airport, Don Muang.

Narongsak Sangapong, the acting Thai Airlines president, estimated that it would take four to five days to send the 6,000 stranded tourists home. British deputy ambassador Daniel Pruce, who had been briefing frustrated British tourists all day, warned that U-Tapao was "a very small airport+and movement would be slow.

Tonight, the anti-government militants were hunkering down in Suvarnabhumi's gleaming departures terminal, eating disposable packages of food and listening to speeches from the PAD leaders.

The indications are that the airport occupation is beginning to carve into the stability of Thailand's economy, which is already reeling from the effects of the international financial crisis.

The Prime Minister has come under extreme pressure to solve the crisis but, although he declared a limited state of emergency, by tonight the police had yet to begin clearing the protesters from the airport.

The Army has made it clear that it will not forcibly remove the hundreds of protesters who had barricaded themselves into the terminal. The military has been scarred by condemnation of their tactics at a PAD protest rally in October, which left two protesters dead and hundreds wounded. The police, too, have been unwilling to take up arms against the protesters.

Nattawut Sai-Kau, a government spokesman, this morning said: "We should do whatever is necessary to open the airports on the basis of non-violence."