

POLITICS

Govt reconciliation drive failing victims, forum told

ACHARA ASHAYAGACHAT

Only accountability for the April and May 2010 violence can bring justice and reconciliation to the country, a forum was told.

The government's attempt to forge reconciliation after the street riots is failing, as victims' grievances have yet to be addressed and the culprits still go unpunished, victims of the violence said.

The forum was held by the People's Information Centre to discuss the impact of the government's crackdown on the red shirt protests.

The group, made up of volunteers, human rights activists and academics on law, political science and humanities, called on society not to forget the incidents.

They said the people responsible for the deaths of 92 people and the injuries to at least 2,000 others must be brought to justice.

Chulalongkorn University political scientist Phuangthong Pavakaphan said silence and submissiveness by the people and the vulnerability and losses of the victims were the dark side of reconciliation demands in the period leading up to Sunday's election.

Piecemeal or one-time compensation was regarded by authorities as an adequate remedy for the victims and their relatives, while the wrongdoers have also been allowed to go unpunished and the truth has yet to be told, she said.

Sawatree Suksri, a Thammasat University law lecturer, said investigations to find the criminals have been disappointingly slow, particularly lawsuits against government officials.

Kritaya Archvanichkul, from Mahidol University's Institute for Population and Social Research, said a judicial process was needed to identify the persons responsible for the deaths and injuries during the events.

"An amnesty cannot be launched until the persons responsible for the violence are punished, or the reconciliation process will only add more bitterness to the victims and their relatives," she said.

Meanwhile, injured victims and relatives of detained suspects have called for the state to give them more help.

"If an amnesty will lead to reconciliation and peace, I will be ready to forgive the person who shot me from behind," said Somphan Phuttachak, 37, a Bangkok

resident from Ubon Ratchathani who was hurt in the crackdown.

"But this must come with sincere and adequate remedial support to several thousands of injured protesters and relatives of the dead.

"A long-awaited apology from the Abhisit government would also be a soothing gesture."

The mother of three was hit with an M16 rifle bullet at 6.30pm on May 17 last year near a police traffic booth under the Bang Na expressway entry. The bullet entered the upper right of the back of her hip and lodged inside her body.

She and her husband, a taxi driver, had regularly joined the red shirt protests to support a call for a House dissolution.

"We don't know why they had to shoot the protesters. But the days after my injury were hell," said Mrs Somphan, a former housemaid.

She said she was asked to leave Ratchawithi Hospital on May 31 while still wearing an oxygen mask and having not fully regained her strength. "The hospital said I had used up my benefits under the 30-baht medical card scheme. I had to pay if I wanted to stay on," she said.

Mrs Somphan said her husband had to travel back and forth between the hospital and the Justice Ministry before obtaining a doctor's statement to qualify for 2,800 baht in compensation for her injuries, including crushed small intestines, pancreas, gall bladder, and left renal duct.

She had to rely on her husband to look after her children and do other household chores while she recovered from her injuries at home.

Another injured protester, 35-year-old Rungsak, who withheld his last name, said the next government must pay attention to the plight of the red shirts.

Reconciliation should mean sustainable care and recovery for the injured and relatives of the victims, he said, as their lives will never be the same.

Mr Rungsak, a father of three and former driver, said his hearing was impaired and right foot hurt by an M79 grenade blast on May 16 near Soi Ngam Duplee.

A lengthy bout of treatment cost him his job, as he could no longer drive. "Questions by government officials like 'how much is enough' and 'how long does the government have to help you' are an insult," said Mr Rungsak.