

Thai trade negotiator with U.S. resigns after criticism, says prime minister
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BANGKOK, Thailand -- The chief Thai negotiator in talks with the United States for a free trade agreement has resigned because criticism of the planned pact has demoralized him, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said Thursday.

Thai newspapers had reported the resignation of negotiator Nitya Pibunsongkram earlier this week, but there had been no official confirmation and Nitya has not spoken publicly on the matter.

"He (Nitya) insisted that he wanted to resign as he has been severely criticized, especially by non-governmental organizations, and it has demoralized him," Thaksin told reporters.

Thaksin said that the resignation will not affect the negotiations, and that a new chief will be appointed to replace Nitya in the negotiating team. The next round of free trade negotiations is expected within two months, Thaksin said.

The sixth round of talks on the trade agreement, held in the northern city of Chiang Mai last week, faced strong opposition from thousands of protesters, many of them people living with HIV/AIDS who feared the deal would hamper Thailand's development of cheap anti-AIDS drug. Other protesters argued that the deal would disadvantage Thai farmers.

They also fear the pact would allow foreigners to take over control of privatized state enterprises supplying essential services, increasing prices.

While supporters say the pact will boost trade and economic growth, opponents fear that the period under which patent laws protect drugs from copying would be extended, delaying the distribution of cheaper generic versions and posing a burden to poorer countries and people.

They also said the deal will hurt farmers by opening local markets to low-priced competition and allowed foreigners to control privatized state enterprises and raise prices of basic services.

The negotiators were forced to change the venue of their meeting after protesters broke through police barricades into the compound of the hotel where the talks were being held. Protesters burnt a coffin with Nitya's name, calling him "America's lackey."

Thailand and the U.S. hope to wrap up the negotiations by midyear. The talks have been held over a period of more than 18 months, longer than negotiation that Washington has carried out for FTAs with any other country.