

## **CHIANG MAI MEETING: 10,000 expected to protests US free-trade talks**

**By Pennapa Hongthong**

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*Farm workers, HIV/Aids, poverty NGOs vow to disrupt event. The sixth round of free-trade talks with the United States next week in Chiang Mai will face the wrath about 10,000 protesters from 12 special-interest groups which have vowed to rally throughout the five-day meeting.*

The non-government organisations involved – including people living with HIV/Aids, the urban poor, small-scale farmers, labour unions, and consumers – believe that not only their lives and economic status are at stake but the nation as a whole would suffer tremendously if the government bent to all the conditions sought by the US.

The campaign against the free-trade agreement would be organised under the banner “Stop the FTA, Stop privatising the country, and Stop creating unfair trade”.

Saree Ongsomwang, the manager of the Consumer Foundation and a key member of FTA Watch, a network of civic organisations opposing bilateral FTAs with trade partners, said the focus of this round would be intellectual property rights (IPR). The US is expected to ask Thailand to allow the patenting of living organisms.

Ubol Yuuwaa, from the Alternative Farming Network, said if the government capitulated to the demand, the US, which is at the forefront of biotechnology research, would come out smelling roses, not Thailand.

Genetically modified crops would pour into the country, as the farming of commercial GM crops has been banned here.

Small-scale growers of soybeans, corn and potatoes would find themselves at the greatest risk of going under from the deluge of imports.

His concern was supported by concrete proof of the damage experienced by farmers after the trade agreement with China opened the floodgates to low-priced fruit and vegetables. Witoon Lienchamroon, of BioThai, an NGO working to protect farmers’ rights, said 40 per cent of the 50,000 families raising onions had to switch crops because they could not compete with the cheaper Chinese imports.

“It looks like the trade agreement is good for consumers who can enjoy cheaper produce, but that’s just an illusion. The cheap prices would be maintained only for a short time. After they gain control of the market [when Thai farmers stop growing the crops], prices would be hiked,” he said.

Kamol Uppakaew, of the network of people living with HIV/Aids, said infected people would have to shoulder a bigger burden than what they already have to bear today, by paying more for anti-retroviral drugs because the IPR system would make them much more expensive.

He was afraid that the IPR system, which has patents as its core, would bar the Government Pharmaceutical Organisation from developing generic versions of HIV drugs.

Infected people at present can access cheap anti-viral drugs produced by the GPO.

“Medicine is one of the four necessities of life. The government should try its best to make sure people get easy access to any medicine, not to increase the prices, which would block poor people from using them,” he said.

Kamol said at least 2,500 HIV patients would join the protest rally during the negotiations, which will run from next Monday to Friday.

The NGOs also called on people such as small businessmen and employees of banks and other financial institutions to join their rally since they would all be affected by the Thai-US FTA.