

Thousands Protest Against US-Thai Trade Talks

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CHIANG MAI, Thailand - Thousands of Thais marched through the northern city of Chiang Mai on Monday to protest against a U.S.-Thai free-trade pact as officials began a sixth round of negotiations.

The protesters, including farmers from the drought-plagued northeast and HIV/AIDS patients in Bangkok, marched 2 km (1 mile) from the city's main train station to the U.S. consulate chanting and waving placards.

"We want the whole negotiation process to end because they are not transparent and against the constitution," said Kannikar Kittivechakul of the People's Network Against Free Trade Agreements and Privatisations, which organised the rally.

The group said a free-trade pact would result in the privatisation of public utilities under U.S. management and farmers would suffer from cheap farm imports while paying more for U.S.-made drugs.

The United States is Thailand's largest trade partner. Thai exports were worth \$15 billion in 2004 and imports \$7.2 billion.

Neena Moorjani, spokeswoman for the U.S. trade delegation, called the protests "a sign of healthy democracy".

Trade negotiators resumed talks on Monday. A Thai negotiator said last week services and financial sectors, left aside in early rounds, would be on the table during the week-long meeting.

Pharmaceuticals, another delicate issue, were also likely to be discussed despite opposition from groups that fear Thailand's generic drug industry would be hurt, Thai chief negotiator Nitya Pibulsonggram said.

William Aldis, the World Health Organisation representative in Bangkok, said Thailand should think carefully about surrendering access to cheap medicine in exchange for a free-trade deal.

"The stakes are indeed high, especially for the 600,000 Thais living with HIV/AIDS and whose survival will depend on the availability of affordable anti-retroviral drugs," Aldis wrote in the Bangkok Post newspaper.

Moorjani said the U.S. delegation hoped a final deal could be wrapped up in a few months.

"Specifically, we hope to make sufficient progress on the text of the chapters under negotiation as well as market access," she said in a statement to Reuters.