

Thailand Says Trade Pact Could Take Time

By Foster Klug
The Associated Press
Wednesday, September 21, 2005

WASHINGTON -- Thailand's foreign minister says Thai misgivings about a U.S.-Thai free trade agreement could hamper a speedy conclusion to negotiations.

A fifth round of trade negotiations is scheduled next week in Hawaii. President Bush and Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra agreed during a meeting Monday to make "vigorous efforts" to reach a free trade agreement, with Bush saying both sides wanted a deal "as soon as possible."

Thai Foreign Minister Kantathi Suphamongkon said Tuesday in an interview that Thailand wanted to ensure its companies had fair access to U.S. markets and that prices for certain goods, including medicine, wouldn't rise in Thailand as a result of an unfair free trade agreement.

"'As soon as possible' is something we have shared since the beginning, but the most important aspect of the FTA is that it has to be fair," Kantathi said. "We'd like to see an FTA in which, once we sign, we can smile and look forward to the future together, rather than cry."

Trade agreements often set off tough political battles in the United States, as was the case with the recent approval of the Central American Free Trade Agreement; any Thai-U.S. agreement would need the OK of Congress.

A spokeswoman for Rob Portman, the U.S. trade representative, said Wednesday that the United States was working with Thai officials on an agreement that includes protection of U.S. intellectual property rights and the environment _ "which are critical to ensuring strong support in Congress."

Spokeswoman Neena Moorjani also said that Portman, noting "concerns about Thailand's progress in key areas of negotiations," also encouraged Thai officials to "take strong steps forward" in the next round so a deal can be reached by the spring of 2006.

Kantathi said the United States should also consider removing trade barriers against Thailand that were set up to protect American shrimpers who complained that they couldn't compete with Thai shrimp dumped on the U.S. market. Kantathi said antidumping measures should be lifted because many Thai shrimpers had their boats and shrimp farms destroyed or damaged in the December tsunami.

"There are some points in which we will have to try to work together to come to a good understanding," Kantathi said. "It has to be fair, and our private sector has to be happy."

Thailand's exports include computers and transistors in addition to seafood.

Kantathi also spoke about Myanmar, defending Thailand's decision to serve as a "door to the world" for the isolated country. He said engagement with Thailand's reclusive neighbor was hastening democracy in the military-run country.

Myanmar's generals, Kantathi said, have told Thai officials that they will meet in November and hope to have a draft of a new constitution finished and a referendum on the document voted on in a matter of months, "rather than open-ended or taking years."

The United States is deeply skeptical of dealing with the generals, and has leveled sanctions on Myanmar. Washington wants the release of opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners and the restoration of freedoms lost when the military took power in 1962.

When asked if the differing policies involving Myanmar, also known as Burma, were causing tension in the U.S.-Thai relationship, the foreign minister said: "Different countries have different approaches. We don't have a problem with that. But the goal is the same."

Kantathi went on, however, to criticize a policy of sanctions and disengagement, which is favored by the United States.

"If you isolate one of the world's most isolated countries, then the people will be hurt and change will be even harder," he said.