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U.S. and Thailand press for trade pact

By Roger Runningen Bloomberg News
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WASHINGTON President George W. Bush of the United States and Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra of Thailand vowed to press forward with negotiations on a free trade agreement and to fight the avian influenza outbreak that is spreading across Asia.

"I committed to President Bush that we are pressing ahead with the free trade agreement," Thaksin said late Monday after a meeting with Bush at the White House.

Bush called Thaksin a leader "who believes in free markets" and said both nations wanted an accord "as soon as possible."

U.S. and Thai officials plan a preliminary round of informal talks to discuss one of the sticking points between the two countries - Thailand's position that the financial services industry should be kept out of the agreement - before official negotiations start in Hawaii on Sept. 26.

Thailand wants more time for its banks, mutual funds, insurers and other such companies to improve their financial strength before the country is opened to U.S. competitors. The United States wants access for its companies seeking a bigger share of the Asia-Pacific market, the world's fastest-growing region.

Another hurdle is whether Thailand will take concrete steps to protect intellectual property rights for movies, music, software or clothing brands. Negotiators in Thailand say they are pessimistic about success in negotiations.

The United States is Thailand's largest export market, and Thailand is the 18th-largest trading partner for the United States.

Last year, Thai exports of garments, steel products, electronic components and electrical appliances to the United States rose 14 percent to \$15.5 billion. Its trade surplus with the United States widened 28 percent to \$8.3 billion.

Bush and Thaksin also discussed avian influenza, a subject the U.S. president highlighted in his address to the United Nations last week.

"Thailand is a leader in putting systems in place" to battle the illness, Bush said. "All of us need to be mindful of this devastating disease."

Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and Cambodia are struggling to stop the spread of the H5N1 virus that has been confirmed as infecting 113 people in the Southeast Asian countries, killing 58.

Failure to control the disease may lead to a mutant variant that can be transmitted between humans, similar to the one known as the Spanish Flu that killed as many as 40 million people worldwide in 1918 and 1919, the World Health Organization says.

Wild water fowl migrating from Siberia, where the virus was detected in July, will probably carry bird flu to Europe, the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, according to the United Nations.

At the United Nations on Sept. 14, Bush announced a new International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza. The partnership requires that countries facing an outbreak immediately share information and provide samples to the world health agency, to improve the global readiness and provide a quicker response to a growing threat.

Britain, the United States, France, Canada and Australia have announced arrangements to stockpile vaccines that may be used against the virus in preparation for a possible global epidemic.

Since an outbreak in three Thai provinces in July, Thaksin's government has restricted the movement of poultry and temporarily banned the popular sport of cock fighting.