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## **300 Thais protest against FTAs**

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HUNDREDS of Thai activists today demonstrated against free trade agreements (FTAs) the government is negotiating with the US and Australia, saying they would adversely affect millions of Thais.

Carrying banners that read "Stop FTA" and "Sovereignty not for sale", about 300 protesters, including politicians, farmers and AIDS charity workers, demanded the government halt the deals until further studies were done. "We want the government to delay FTA signings and ask for more careful study about their potential impact," Witoon Lianchamroon, coordinator of the non-governmental group FTA Watch, said.

"We need transparency and justice in negotiating the FTA with the US."

Thailand concluded an FTA with Australia last October and Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is scheduled to travel to Canberra to sign the pact early next month.

Negotiations with Washington were due to start in the United States today.

The Canberra deal is expected to boost Australia's gross domestic product by an estimated \$US6.7 billion (\$9.6 billion) and Thailand's by \$US32 billion (\$45.86 billion) over a 20 year period, Prime Minister John Howard's office has said.

The deal with the US, Thailand's largest trading partner, would similarly boost economic gains but the kingdom would first have to significantly reduce its agricultural tariffs, the independent US International Trade Commission has argued.

Witoon said Thailand's massive farm industry should be protected.

"The FTA conditions on the dairy industry would affect about six million Thais who are dairy farmers," he said.

US business groups regard Thailand's complex tariff structure as a major impediment to trade, along with high Thai duties in most sectors. Thailand slaps an average 24 per cent tariff rate on US farm products.

The Thai protesters expressed concern over the US demands that intellectual property rights be included in the pact.