

# Thai Farmers Fear Free Trade Deal With US

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**BANGKOK, Jan 6 (IPS) - When United States negotiators fly into Thailand to thrash out a bilateral free trade deal, next week, they will be greeted with jeers rather than this country's famed smile of welcome.**

Activists opposed to the free trade agreement (FTA) view the sixth round of talks in the northern city of Chiang Mai from Jan. 9-13 as a defining moment, and in a bid to raise the ante will bring 10,000 people on to the streets to protest against the talks.

"Thailand stands to lose much if the FTA with the U.S. is signed," Saree Ongsamwong, general secretary of the Foundation for Consumers, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), said in an interview. "It will increase poverty among the small farmers in the provinces."

Street protests are the only avenue open for opponents of the FTA, since the Thai government has shrouded its policies in secrecy, adds Saree, whose group belongs to a nationwide coalition of anti-FTA NGOs, called FTW Watch. "There has been no public debate and the government has refused to listen to our concerns."

Some of these worries are with reason, given that Thai farmers took a beating following similar bilateral trade deals that the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra signed with China, Australia and New Zealand.

Cheaper imports of garlic and onions from China have put 40 percent of Thai farmers out of business, Witoon Lianchumroon, coordinator of FTA Watch, told reporters on Thursday. "About 50,000 farming households have been affected."

Likewise, an estimated 100,000 Thai farmers who raised cattle for meat have been unable to compete against cheaper imports from New Zealand that followed the Thai-New Zealand FTA agreement.

Witoon estimates that nearly 6.5 million farmers will be affected if Bangkok signs a similar trade deal with Washington, resulting in U.S. agriculture products flooding the local markets.

Thai farmers make up a substantial slice of this South-east Asian country's labour force - some 60 percent of the country's 65 million people - yet they remain among the lowest wage earners. The average monthly income for the agriculture sector workers hovers between 2,500 baht (62.50 U.S. dollars) to 3,000 baht (75 dollars).

Bangkok, however, appears unfazed by such objections as it talks of the FTA with the United States being ready for implementation in a few months. "Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and U.S. President George Bush earlier indicated that their intention to wrap up the deal by this spring," an English language daily, 'The Nation,' reported Thursday.

The value of two-way trade between the two countries was estimated at over 21 billion US dollars in 2003, with Thailand enjoying an edge.

Proposed changes would not only mean a possible loss in income for Thais farmers but also possible loss of lives among Thais living with HIV/AIDS who depend on cheap, locally-produced generic anti-AIDS drugs.

"The government's policy to provide cheap drugs for people with AIDS will be threatened with this FTA," says Kamol Uppakaew, chairman of the Thai Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS. "Those who need the new line of drugs will not be able to get it because the price will be too high,

20,000 baht (500 dollars) per month."

His concerns will be put to test during the talks in Chiang Mai, since discussions over intellectual property rights are expected to feature for the first time. Other issues to be taken up include opening up of the financial services sector and the lucrative telecommunication industry.

Currently, the Thai government's universal health care programme supplies generic anti-AIDS drugs to nearly 100,000 people who need medication. In all, there are some 670,000 people with HIV in this country, where over 300,000 people have died from AIDS-related causes since the pandemic was first detected in the 1980s.

According to the activists, the planned FTA with the U.S. would make it difficult for the state-run pharmaceutical agency to produce the new line of anti-AIDS drugs because of the position Washington is taking over intellectual property rights.

The U.S. wants to enforce a 25-year period to protect patents for drugs as against the 20-year patent protection that is the case under the existing global free trade rules.

"This agreement is like putting people on an express train heading towards a disaster," says Witoon. "Even Thai academics are against it. Over 80 of them are calling the government to stop the FTA talks." (END/2006)