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US-THAI RELATIONS: FTA with Thailand opposed

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Leading Congressman's letter slams Thaksin's 'repression' of freedom

A growing campaign in the US Congress to encourage the Bush Administration to re-evaluate its policy with Thailand has reached a new height, with a leading member of the House of Representatives making moves to derail upcoming talks on free trade with Thailand.

In a letter circulated to other US lawmakers and obtained by The Nation yesterday US Congressman Dennis J Kucinich, who is also a US presidential candidate for the Demo-crat Party, urged his colleagues not to support a free-trade agreement with Thailand "until we address Prime Minister Thaksin's repressive policies and his cosyng up to Burma's brutal military junta".

The US Congress will be considering a new free-trade agreement with Thailand, and a veto by the American lawmakers could prove an embarrassment for both sides. US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick formally notified the US Congress in February of the intention to begin free-trade-agreement negotiations with Thailand.

Kucinich said: "Thailand is no longer the most democratic, open and free partner of the United States in Southeast Asia that it once was.

"Prime Minister Thaksin Shina-watra has orchestrated a sweeping crackdown and takeover of the news media," he said, pointing to apparent interference with the Thai media that had resulted in the removal of editors and journalists for criticism of the government.

Kucinich also criticised Thaksin's war on drugs, adding: "That too is marred by contempt for rule of law." He quoted Amnesty International reports, saying: "Thai authorities have been complicit in 2,600 extrajudicial murders of suspected, but never convicted, drug traffickers."

He blasted the Thaksin government for "increasingly cosyng up to Burma's military junta", the State Peace and Democratic Council (SPDC), and added that the government's endorsement of Rangoon's so-called road map to democracy was "clearly undermining US policy in the region".

"Let us not forget that last year Congress passed HR 2330, the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003, by a vote of [418-2] to halt all imports from Burma so as to rebuke the SPDC for its atrocious human-rights record," he said.

"While it warms to the Burmese junta, Thaksin's Thailand is turning a cold shoulder to Burmese refugees," he said, pointing to a recent report by Human Rights Watch saying the government's repatriation "is placing [Burmese] refugees and undocumented asylum-seekers in danger of persecution, arrest, economic sanctions or other reprisals from government authorities upon return to Burma".

"Finally it must be noted that the majority of workers on the Thailand-Burma border working in Thai factories are Burmese refugees who are working in sweatshop-like conditions with absolutely no labour-rights standards," he said.

"Burmese trade-union organisers that have attempted to encourage workers to demand better labour protection are now facing persecution and are on the run from Thai police," he said.

"A free-trade agreement with Thailand will reward these anti-democracy, anti-human-rights practices by the Thaksin government. It will also bolster the military junta in Burma," he said.

US Senator Mitch McConnell made similar criticism in March of Thailand's Burma policy and alleged that it might have been shaped by the Shinawatra family's investment in that country.

"What investments, including projects and activities related to iPSTAR, do Shin Satellite and Shin Corporation have in Burma, and/or have planned for Burma?" McConnell asked the US Senate in early March.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell is scheduled to appear in front of the Senate's Foreign Appropriation Subcommittee later this month, and the Senator has said he will put the same questions to him. The subcommittee is chaired by McConnell.

Don Pathan
THE NATION