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TRADE NEGOTIATIONS: FTA opponents plan rally

Kraisak, civic groups say farmers, poor haven't been consulted in government's rush to sign deals.

A leading senator and civic groups are planning to hold a demonstration today against what they call the government's rush to conclude free-trade negotiations, which they say would have great ramifications on many people in the agricultural sector.

Hundreds of people from various groups will gather at the Royal Plaza in the morning before marching on Government House.

Kraisak Chonhavan, chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, is going to lead the protest. He said that people who will be adversely affected by free-trade agreements (FTAs) had not been consulted during the negotiation process.

He said the Thai-China FTA was signed in October last year, but farmers had only learnt about it in April when a massive surge of Chinese agricultural goods came entered Thai markets.

The government's short-term solutions for affected farmers did not rightly tackle the problem, he said, pointing out that substitute crops suggested by the government were similar to imported products from China.

According to Article 224 of the Constitution, the government must ask for parliamentary approval if international agreements could affect Thai sovereignty, he said.

The Thai Network of People Living with HIV/Aids will also join the protest. The group had been campaigning against the inclusion of intellectual property rights in the Thai-US FTA.

"It is likely that as a result of the Thai-US FTA, essential medicines will be out of reach for poor people due to patents," said the chair of the network, Kamon Upkaew.

The group planned to gather 50,000 signatures and submit them to the government as a petition calling for intellectual property rights to be kept out of the deal.

The first round of formal negotiations for the Thai-US FTA will begin today in Honolulu, Hawaii.