

EU vows to seek balance in trade pact

Aguiar Machado says Thai team were 'good negotiators'

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The lead negotiator of the European Union (EU) defended his team's position in the free trade agreement (FTA) talks with Thailand, saying his delegation would try to find the right balance to address concerns over the deal's impact.

EU delegation chief Joao Aguiar Machado said Thailand and the EU have made some progress in their talks with "a spirit of constructiveness".

Speaking to the *Bangkok Post* in a telephone interview from Chiang Mai after the first day of talks, Mr Aguiar Machado said negotiators have started to clarify positions in most of the areas in writing.

"We've discussed in concrete terms such issues as geographical indications [GI], customs matters, services and investment, technical barriers, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and sustainable development," Mr Aguiar Machado said.

Although he said the Thai and EU negotiators had made some progress, he could not say to what degree these issues were resolved. "We've touched upon the matters, but the talks are difficult."

He noted that neither side tried to avoid discussing those issues or resorted to tactics in negotiations. "We spoke openly and tried to understand each other's positions."

Asked if the rally outside the venue forced the Thai delegation to take a tough stance, Mr Aguiar Machado said his counterparts were "good negotiators".

The Thais were well-prepared and they were doing a good job, he said. "In fact, both Thai and EU negotiators are well aware of the opinions of Thai and European civil society," he said.

The EU negotiator said his Thai counterparts represented the country well.

"As they need to arbitrate and balance different impacts [from the FTA], they [therefore] are negotiating in a very serious manner," he said.

Asked how he felt about Thai civil society's call for the Nobel Peace Prize to be stripped from the EU, he said that Thai NGOs had completely misunderstood the issue.

He said members of Thai civil society were free to express their views on anything. But to call for the EU to be stripped of the Nobel prize, which is of wider importance than the trade negotiations, was unthinkable.

The EU, Mr Aguiar Machado said, has started FTA negotiations with developing countries in Asia and Latin America, but no one from those countries had questioned the EU's role in achieving and maintaining peace.

"It is a value that is preserved around the world, so Thai civil society should understand it. Expressing views is not always right. I feel they attack us when they do not get things the way they like," Mr Aguiar Machado said.

Asked if the EU could assure the FTA pact would not go beyond the framework of the WTO's Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (Trips), he said issues going beyond Trips frameworks, such as GI, might benefit Thailand more.

If an agreement was reached, Thai rice and Thai silk, among other products from Thailand, would be protected in Europe, he said.

To say all Trips Plus were bad was a simplification. "They need to look at the details," he said, adding that the EU would negotiate those concerns raised by Thai civil society with the Thai authorities, not with civil society.

Thai civil society leaders are concerned the FTA deal might affect Thai people's access to medicine and their share of benefits from bio-diversity. They are also concerned the deal will reduce Thailand's consumer and environmental protection power, and will lead to an influx of alcoholic drinks and cigarettes.

"We hope we can find the right balance on these questions. We'll discuss further until we reach a point of consensus [on these issues]," Mr Aguiar Machado said.

Asked how long until a deal could be struck, Mr Aguiar Machado said it was difficult to tell. He hoped it would be finished within two years with the next round of talks in Europe taking place in December.

Asked why the EU was pushing to finish talks so quickly, he said the EU has tried hard for many years to discuss a regional pact with Asean, without success.

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