

Deadly attack on Thai rubber farmers

Pre-dawn shooting may inflame tensions over falling prices

By TAN HUI YEE
THAILAND CORRESPONDENT
IN BANGKOK

ARMED men shot at rubber farmers, killing one person early yesterday morning, threatening to inflame tensions in an ongoing protest by farmers in southern Thailand to pressure the government to shore up falling rubber prices.

Over the past week, protesters have blockaded a major highway as well as the main railway track connecting Bangkok to Malaysia in a bid to extract from the government a price guarantee of 120 baht (\$4.80) per kg, which is about 50 per cent above global prices.

A politician from the opposition Democrat Party, which has a strong support base in the south, joined the protest, though the party has denied inciting the movement.

Thailand is the world's largest producer of rubber, but its farmers have been hit by sliding commodity prices in recent years as demand has dropped in tandem with slowing economies around the world.

The farmers had earlier threatened to ramp up the protest and rally across the country tomorrow.

The threat, however, appeared to peter out at the end of Thursday after farmers in the north, north-east and central regions in Thailand agreed to a government counter-offer of 80 baht per kg of rubber as well as subsidies for rubber plantations.

But the protests in the south continued. According to local media, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a protest site in the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat before dawn yesterday, killing one man and injuring another.

The farmers have called the government to take responsibility for the incident.

Deputy Prime Minister Pracha Promnok said that police were not responsible for the killing, according to state broadcaster MCOT.

The police, meanwhile, are offering a 100,000 baht reward for evidence leading to the arrest of the attackers.

The killing could harden positions and



Thai rubber farmers at the site where a man was killed and another wounded when unknown armed men opened fire yesterday as they held a protest in the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat to pressure the government to shore up falling rubber prices. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

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intensify protests, political analyst Panitan Wattanayagorn from Chulalongkorn University told The Straits Times.

"It depends on the government's response to this matter," he said, adding that a speedy investigation would help appease protesters.

Rubber exports earned 250 billion baht last year. An earlier price support scheme

for rubber farmers ended in May, and the government is reluctant to extend aid in a way which would add to its existing stockpile of 200,000 tonnes of rubber.

A two-year-old price guarantee scheme for rice farmers has already cost the government about 600 billion baht as well as its position as the world's top rice exporter.

Critics have also attacked that scheme for bloating public debt, as well as filling state warehouses with more than 15 million tonnes of rice it cannot sell.

On Friday, Transport Minister Chatchart Sittipunt said the country's highway authority was studying the possibility of mixing rubber with asphalt on road surfaces in order to reduce the excess supply of the material.

According to the Bangkok Post, he was also considering using rubber in the construction of railway sleepers.

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India's scientists return as opportunities beckon

By KRITTIVAS MUKHERJEE
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IN NEW DELHI

IN RETURNING to India to work as a scientist two years ago, Dr Praveen Kumar Vemula achieved two things in one stroke: one, to work in the virtually virgin market for biomedics and the other, to repay a debt to his motherland.

"I came back with a scientific vision," says the 39-year-old former Harvard Medical School-Massachusetts Institute of Technology fellow, who left India in 2006 to research biomedical technologies.

"My dream is to do high-quality translational science from India," says Dr Vemula, referring to his field of work in which he develops ways to build and monetise new biomedical technologies.

He now works at the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bangalore, southern India, and is among a growing tribe of Indian scientists who are returning home, drawn by a fast-improving environment for high-quality research.

For a long time, India's brightest scientific brains left for the West, especially the United States, attracted by its world-class research facilities and job opportunities. Nearly all who did their doctorates abroad stayed on to work. This left India with only a very small pool of qualified scientists.

To reverse the tide, the Indian government, its elite teaching institutions and industry began to take initiatives about a decade ago to build world-class research facilities, give generous fellowships and research grants, and offer well-paying jobs.

For most returning scientists, three fellowships have proved a major draw. The Ramanujan and Ramalingaswami fellowships carry high grants and salaries, while Britain's Wellcome Trust is co-sponsoring a 10-year, US\$250 million (\$319 million) fellowship for biomedical scientists.

"One has a lot more freedom in fellowships, using the funds and choosing the right institute to join," says Dr Balasubramaniyam Virappan, 35, a Ramalingaswami fellow who returned from London last year to do research on liver diseases.

At least 500 Indian scientists have returned in the past seven years, a sign that the measures are working. The demand for lucrative research fellowships in India today far outstrips supply.

A recent study done by global knowledge consultants Elsevier found that India had a 0.6 per cent net inflow of scientists - namely, a brain gain - over a 15-year period. This is because incoming and visiting

scientists are more productive than those who stay put in India or are leaving the country.

Dr Vemula noted that in the past 10 years, there has been an enormous improvement in infrastructure and also enhanced collaboration between individual labs and between institutions.

Getting funds used to be a problem, as was the lack of qualified staff. Only about 10 per cent of government research money went to universities, with half the teaching positions at top technology institutes and universities left unfilled.

The funding problem has largely been solved with the government allocating more money for research. In some top technical schools, this went up more than tenfold to ensure that bright students remain in their institutions to do independent research.

"As a result, we are able to get more projects funded and more big-budget projects approved," says Dr Kaushik Chatterjee, 34, a Ramanujan fellow at Bangalore's Indian Institute of Science.

Explaining his decision to leave the US to return two years ago, he said: "I felt that if I can pursue my career goal, which is academic research, in India at the same level as that in the West, then there's no reason not to come back."

Other factors contributing to the reverse brain drain are intense competition among scientists in the West and also more restrictive visa policies in recent years. Those who return from abroad have an opportunity to say they are back to serve their country.

This partly explains growing demand for fellowships. The Ramalingaswami programme, for instance, received 136 applications for 50 seats for its 2012/13 intake.

Still, the West beckons and about 75 per cent of Indian scientists are working in the US alone.

The United Nations Development Programme says India loses US\$2 billion a year in potential productivity from the emigration of computer experts to the US alone. Indian students going abroad for higher studies also cost foreign exchange outflow of some US\$13 billion annually.

Most returning scholars believe things are looking up for India.

"Largely (it is) a combination of growing opportunities in India and shrinking research career prospects in the US," says Dr Chatterjee, summing up the reasons for the change. "On a personal note, there is always a reason to come back."

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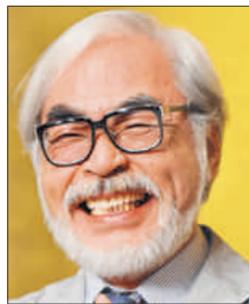
ASIABRIEFS

6.5-magnitude quake near remote islands

JAKARTA - A powerful 6.5-magnitude earthquake struck off eastern Indonesia yesterday, the United States Geological Survey said, but no tsunami warning was issued and there were no reports of casualties or damage.

The quake struck in waters near the remote Barat Daya islands in Maluku province at 8.52pm (7.52pm Singapore time), 411km east of Atambua and 425km south of Ambon, and at a depth of 132km.

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Director and manga artist Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away won an Oscar for best animated feature.

Japanese animator Miyazaki retiring

VENICE - Japan's Hayao Miyazaki, 72, a director of feature-length animations and manga artist who has been compared to Walt Disney, is retiring after four decades.

"Miyazaki has decided Kaze Tachinu will be his last film," Mr Koji Hoshino, head of Studio Ghibli, which was co-founded by Miyazaki, said at the Venice film festival yesterday.

Miyazaki's most famous works internationally have been Princess Mononoke and Spirited Away, which won an Oscar for best animated feature.

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