

Thailand's new 'war on drugs'

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BANGKOK - THAI Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva on Wednesday launched a new 'war on drugs,' echoing a controversial 2003 campaign by ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra that left more than 2,500 people dead.

Mr Abhisit, who came to power in December after the fall of a government that was loyal to his arch foe Thaksin, said the new six-month anti-narcotics drive was in response to a rise in addiction in the kingdom.

'We must decisively crack down on drugs usage,' Mr Abhisit told officials at Government House in Bangkok, adding that the new campaign would run from April 1 to Sept 30.

'But we must carefully implement the crackdown under the law in order to ensure it does not lead to other problems,' he added in an apparent reference to Thaksin's previous campaign. Mr Abhisit said the number of drug addicts in Thailand had risen from 460,000 in 2003 to 655,000 last year.

Tightening border security against the illegal trafficking of drugs would be a priority, Mr Abhisit said, with neighbouring Myanmar being the world's second biggest producer of illegal opium and a major source of methamphetamines.

'None of these drugs are produced in our country but come from neighbouring countries, so we have to have better measures to protect our country,' the premier said.

Thailand's capital, Bangkok, will also be a focus of the campaign, along with the provinces in the deep south, where a five-year separatist insurgency continues, he said. Progress would be reassessed after three months, he added.

Human rights groups have said that at least 2,500 people died in extrajudicial killings in 2003 and 2004 during a get-tough campaign launched by Thaksin, who was toppled in a coup in 2006 and now lives in exile.

Thaksin defended the deaths as 'bad guys killing bad guys' and his get-tough campaign not only enjoyed widespread public support but also appeared to stem the supply of narcotics in Thailand.

Mr Abhisit's move comes amid criticism that - despite his Democrat party's hostility towards Thaksin - his three-month-old government has appropriated many of the billionaire's populist policies. -

P.S.

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