

Prayut tries to win red hearts

'Isan policies' unveiled amid anti-coup dissent

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Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha yesterday arrived in the northeastern province of Khon Kaen on his first official visit to the region, promising policies to solve local issues including droughts.

His speech to unveil the policies at Khon Kaen provincial hall was an apparent bid to tackle political differences, but five students briefly disrupted the address, flashing the three-fingered salute denouncing the coup.

Earlier, anti-coup leaflets were found on streets surrounding the hall. The leaflets said "Isan does not welcome dictatorship", but were swiftly disposed of prior to Gen Prayut's arrival.

Khon Kaen is known to be a political stronghold of the red-shirt United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship movement and the Pheu Thai government toppled in the May 22 coup.

Before leaving Bangkok, Gen Prayut said the trip to the Northeast was to investigate local problems with the management of water resources, which are to blame for repeated water shortages.

The prime minister insisted the trip had nothing to do with politics amid speculation he was trying to win over people in the region.

He said it is his job to take care of all people across the country, adding that droughts pose an imminent threat so he must inspect water management plans.

He said he also planned to follow up on the work of the new Damrongtham centres, set up by the Interior Ministry to receive and handle public complaints.

In Khon Kaen, Gen Prayut chaired a meeting of 20 governors from the Northeast and heads of several government agencies including the Royal Irrigation Department, the Natural Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Department and the Groundwater Resources Department.

He was briefed on water reserves and provincial preparations to deal with possible drought. Gen Prayut ordered officials to step up efforts in tackling chronic drought problems.

"I will use this in your performance evaluations. From now on, drought problems must decrease. If problems are not alleviated next year, you will be in trouble. Flood problems should also be reduced or you will be in trouble too," he said.

Gen Prayut also instructed provincial governors to do more to create jobs for local people, strengthen the economy in their provinces, and improve the livelihoods and well-being of the public.

After his visit to Khon Kaen, Gen Prayut went to inspect the water level of the Lampao dam in Kalasin province.

Amnuay Khlangpha, a former Pheu Thai Party MP, said the prime minister should focus on the work of the National Legislative Assembly, the National Reform Council and the Constitution Drafting Committee instead of making trips to the provinces.

"I'd like him to concentrate on the economic and political situation and make sure the elections take place as planned," he said.

Alongkorn Akkasaeng, a political science lecturer at Mahasarakham University's College of Politics and Governance, said he believes the prime minister will be able to win the hearts and minds of the majority of northeastern people if he softens his personality and listens more to those who have different ideas to himself.

"Gen Prayut is familiar with a top-down way of working. That's why he is applying this kind of structure to governing the country. There is too much bureaucracy in his administration," he said.

Mr Alongkorn urged the prime minister to work more closely with civil society to gather information and opinions beneficial to the country's development.

Sida Sonsri, a university expert on political development and Southeast Asia who works in the Northeast, said she is uncertain if the prime minister will be able to woo locals, since the majority are still loyal to the previous government.

"It is not easy to change their views in one day," Ms Sida said.

However, she backed the premier's efforts to solve basic problems such as drought. She called on anti-coup and anti-government protesters in the Northeast to open their minds to the prime minister as a Thai person, not a soldier.