

Students greet PM with 3-finger salute

WASSANA NANUAM

A group of Khon Kaen student activists surprised Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha with an anti-coup greeting during his first visit to the Northeast yesterday.

Wearing anti-coup T-shirts with the slogan "We don't want the coup", five Khon Kaen University students managed to sneak past the tight security to flash the three-finger salute taken from the movie *The Hunger Games*.

The protest took place as the prime minister was delivering a speech on ways to tackle drought on a podium in front of provincial hall.

The five, who are members of the Khon Kaen University's Dao Din student group, were immediately taken away by military police and sent to a local police station to be interrogated.

The students, identified later as Wasan Seksit, Jetsathit Namkot, Jatupat Boonpatraksa, Phayu Boonsophon and Wichakorn Anuchon were later taken to the 23rd Military Circle's Sri Patcharin base to undergo "attitude adjustment", according to officials.

They were released after seven hours.

The students were told to return to the army base with their parents to hear charges of violating NCPO orders. They refused to sign a document stating that they would not conduct any activities that go against NCPO orders.

The prime minister appeared relaxed about the incident.

"Well, that's it. But it's okay. Go easy on them. We will take care of the problems.

Any more protests? Make them quick," he said. He also joked later that he thought it was an entertainment show.

Apart from staging anti-coup activities, Dao Din members are also reported to have been staunch supporters of local villagers troubled by various private and state projects in the Northeast.

The students have assisted local villagers suffering from environmental impacts caused by gold mining in Loei since 2007, a potash mining business in Udon Thani and oil exploration in Kalasin.

The group has held a series of anti-coup activities since the military seized power, including candle-lit gatherings at various places to call for democracy in the country.

Prior to this incident, members of the group had been taken to army barracks for questioning.

Dao Din, which has about 20 members, has a clear target of promoting human rights-related laws among the public with activities held to interact with the locals.

Most members are law students at Khon Kaen University but some are from Mahasarakham University.

Dao Din members were involved in an effort to fend off policemen as they attempted to disperse a crowd of villagers trying to attend a public hearing on Tung-kum Co's expansion of its gold mining operation in Wang Saphung district in front of Wat Phon Thong in Loei's Muang district on Sept 8 last year.

The group is seen as an ally of villagers who are troubled by influential business operators.



Student activists slip past security guards and flash the three-fingered 'Hunger Games' salute to protest against the May 22 coup as Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha is about to deliver a speech in front of Khon Kaen provincial hall. CHANAT KATANYU