

Thaksin: Gas pipeline project a done deal

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BANGKOK, Fri. — A gas pipeline project between Thailand and Malaysia is a done deal and will go ahead as planned, said Thailand's Prime Minister, ahead of scheduled talks with his Malaysian counterpart who arrived today.

"The pipeline project has been clear for a long time," Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said.

"We have studied and we have decided. Now we are just calculating the exact route to avoid communities," he said.

The pipeline is likely to come up during discussions between Thaksin and Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who arrived in the northern city of Chiang Mai today evening for a three-day visit. Dr Mahathir and Thaksin will meet for dinner in Chiang Mai and travel to Bangkok tomorrow.

The pipeline, part of a US\$1.5 billion (RM5.7 billion) joint venture to exploit an offshore gas field in the Gulf of Thailand, has been delayed for more than a year because of strong opposition from Thai environmental groups and local villagers.

The proposed 352-kilometre pipeline was slated to pass through five villages on the Thai coast, 950km south of Bangkok. A gas separation plant and an adjacent 20,000-hectare industrial zone would also be built in the area.

But activists and villagers say water that would flow into the sea after cooling the gas separation plant could harm the ecology of the gulf and mercury released in extracting the gas could kill fish.

The Government says it has conducted environmental studies and is satisfied that the ecosystem is safe.

A group of 10 villagers from the south protested outside the Malaysian Embassy in Bangkok today against the pipeline.

In a letter addressed to Dr Mahathir and delivered to the Malaysian Embassy, the group said the decision to build the pipeline went against the Malaysian Constitution, which guarantees communities the right to conserve and manage their natural resources and environment.

Suraiman Matyusok, one of the protesters, said the pipeline would pollute the area's water, making it impossible to farm or raise farm animals.

"The animals that drink the polluted water will die," Suraiman said. — AP