

Chiang Mai (Northern Thailand): Thai activists claim victory over luxury housing on forest land

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Government bows to protesters and agrees to shelve development near Chiang Mai.

Environmental activists in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai claimed victory on Sunday after the country's military government agreed not to continue the development of luxury property on forest land.

The decision follows a demonstration in Chiang Mai last week in which more than 1,000 people protested against the construction of a luxury development earmarked to house judges in the foothills of the Doi Suthep mountains.

The demonstration was one of the largest since Thailand's junta took power in a 2014 coup. It was also one of a growing number of anti-government protests, including in Bangkok, that are putting pressure on the government before a general election planned for early 2019.

Green ribbons symbolising the environmental movement have appeared in public places in Chiang Mai, including on lamp posts and on cars, over the past week.

The Thai prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha sent Suwaphan Tanyuvaradhana, one of his senior officials, to Chiang Mai on Sunday to talk to protest leaders.

"We have concluded that no one will be living in this housing estate," Suwaphan said after a meeting with the activists. The area will eventually be restored to the forest, he added.

The government would form a committee with activists and representatives from the local community to determine the future use of the land currently under development, which includes 45 houses, he said.

A decision will be taken later this week, but construction of the homes already under way would have to continue for the government to honour its agreement with the construction firm involved.

Activists hailed the decision as a victory. "What we have now is a promise that Doi Suthep forest will be restored," said Teerasak Roopsuwan, one of the movement's leaders.

"I think this could be a model for other parts of the country that public projects must not only be legal, but they must also consider local people's opinions."

Reuters in Chiang Mai

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Thailand: hundreds stage largest protest since start of military rule

Environmental activists demonstrate against luxury housing project in Chiang Mai.

Over a thousand people have gathered in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand to protest against the building of a government luxury housing project on forested land, police have said.

The gathering on Sunday was one of the largest since Thailand's junta took power following a 2014 coup. The junta imposed a ban on public gatherings of over five people and has largely curbed freedom of expression through various orders and used military and police forces to block public gatherings.

Aerial images of the housing project for judges, circulated on social media during the past few months, showed construction has carved into the forested foothills of Chiang Mai's Doi Suthep mountain, inciting public anger.

The police estimated over a thousand people took part in the protest, which they said proceeded in an orderly fashion. "Around 1,250 people took part in the protest," said Col Paisan, deputy commander of Chiang Mai police.

"The protesters were focused on environmental issues and not politics, and they cleaned the street afterwards," Paisan said. He said the organisers made a proper request for the gathering beforehand and so the protest was allowed to proceed.

Protesters, many wearing green ribbons, demanded the government demolish the new buildings that encroach into Doi Suthep mountain, saying the government must comply in seven days or face more protests.

Public officials have defended the project, pointing out construction was legal and on state-owned land that does not encroach into the national park covering the mountain.

Officials also said protesters could face legal action if the housing was demolished and that the homes should be used for 10 years before the public could reassess any environmental impact.

Construction started in 2015 and has faced opposition from local environmental groups who regard the mountain as sacred for Chiang Mai and as a "natural lung" for the north's largest city.

Reuters

* The Guardian, Sun 29 Apr 2018 18.27 BST Last modified on Sun 29 Apr 2018 22.00 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/29/thailand-environmental-protest-chiang-mai>

