

HIGHWAYS

Govt pressed over land grab payouts

POST REPORTERS

Transport officials are racing against time to pay compensation to several hundred villagers to end a year-long conflict over the expropriation of their land for the construction of the Bang Yai-Kanchanaburi motorway.

They have less than two weeks to finish the payout process because Transport Minister Saksayam Chidchob set the end of this month as the deadline.

In total, the government has to pay more than 12 billion baht to villagers in Nonthaburi, Nakhon Pathom, Ratchaburi and Kanchanaburi, where the new 96-km motorway runs through.

Deputy Prime Minister and Public Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul yesterday gave payouts to 22 villagers — 20 from Kanchanaburi and another two from Ratchaburi — during a ceremony along a section of the route in tambon Takhlam En in Kanchanaburi's Tha Maka district.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha presided over a similar event in Nakhon Pathom on Dec 13.

“Once all the compensation is given out, workers will resume construction immediately,” said Sarawut Songsivilai, head of the Department of Highways, which oversees the 55-billion-baht project.

Construction of the road has been hampered for more than a year due to opposition from villagers who accused the government of dragging its feet over compensation payments.

Transport officials said a steep rise in land prices prevented them from compensating all villagers. The department estimated the project would affect more than 1,000 households and 5,000 land plots across the four provinces.

In Kanchanaburi alone, there are up to 689 affected villagers.

“The problem saw construction slow by 25% and the project is now behind schedule,” Mr Sarawut said.

This prompted the cabinet to raise the compensation budget, originally set at 5.4 billion baht, to 17 billion baht.

After the conflict is settled, the road will take about three years to complete and should open by the end of 2023, according to the highways department.

The route, which stretches from Bangkok's Western Ring Road to Kanchanaburi's Tha Muang district, will cut travel time considerably for drivers heading to and from the western province.

Usually, trips between Kanchanaburi and the capital can take up to two and a half hours, but with the motorway they should only take about 50 minutes.