

## **Thailand: Angry rubber planters plan rally to force govt's hand**

A drop of raw latex falls from a rubber tree. Natural rubber consumption is set to expand 3.4 percent to 11.3 million tons this year, while production climbs 3.2 percent also to 11.3 million tons, according to Lekshmi Nair, senior economist at the International Rubber Study Group. Desperate rubber farmers from 14 southern provinces plan to stage a rally tomorrow to prod the government into taking measures to solve the problem of falling rubber prices. The farmers complained that the low price has caused them heavy losses. Currently, smoked rubber sheet is sold at around 82 baht a kilogramme compared to 108-112 baht/kg back in March. Preecha Sukkasem, leader of a network of rubber growers in Songkhla, said farmers would gather in front of the provincial hall of Songkhla tomorrow to demand a government solution to the slump in rubber prices. He said rubber framers had brought the issue to the attention of the government several times. Recently, they handed a letter calling on Deputy Agriculture and Cooperatives Minister Nattawut Saikuar to ensure higher rubber prices. But it appears the government had ignored their complaints and did not take any action as rubber prices have continued to dip, Mr Preecha said. The Agriculture and Cooperatives Ministry has been criticised for its unsuccessful attempt to shore up rubber prices. The cabinet had allocated the ministry a 15 billion-baht budget to buy rubber from cooperatives and community businesses at 100 baht/kg for raw rubber sheet and 104 baht/kg for smoked rubber sheet, but this did little to stop market prices from dropping further. Mr Nattawut has blamed the slump on the eurozone economic crisis. Wan Pheuknuch, a member of the Rubber Farmer Cooperatives Network of Thailand, urged the Agricultural Extension Department and the Cooperative Promotion Department to accept rubber planters as associate members as many planters still cannot find a market to sell their rubber latex. Becoming associate members would allow them to sell rubber latex to the government at 92 baht/kg while private merchants buy their rubber latex at between 72-74 baht/kg, he said.