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BOX-OFFICE BUMP DESPITE CRACKDOWN

Crowds still hungry after controversy

POST REPORTERS

>> A week of controversy has not dampened enthusiasm for the latest *Hunger Games* blockbuster, which drew a 20% bigger crowd than its predecessor in its opening two days.

The long queues of fans at megaplexes suggest *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay — Part 1* may even benefit from the regime's crackdown on the three-finger salute from the film, which has been adopted by anti-coup protesters.

First-day ticket sales were reported to be 13.6 million baht, up 20% from last year's *Catching Fire*, said a person with knowledge of the situation who wasn't authorised to speak publicly.

Jeff Gomez, chief executive of Starlight Runner Entertainment, a movie marketing consultancy, said having the film pulled from at least one cinema and the crack-down on the salute would only heighten interest in the film.

"Whether it's pulled from one theatre or all, it's too late, because social media has already galvanised a deep connection with the picture," Mr Gomez said.

The United Nations has criticised the junta for detaining those who held a three-fingered salute protest last week, while Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has warned that people using the defiant gesture could "jeopardise their future".

The salute has become the unofficial symbol of resistance against the army's May coup with scores detained for using it, including six students last week.

The same gesture is used in the fictional Hollywood blockbuster franchise by rebels fighting against a dictatorial regime.

Gen Prayut said he felt unthreatened by such protests but warned those caught using the gesture risked creating problems for themselves.

"I'm not concerned by the three-finger protest," he said on Friday. But he added: "I don't know whether it is illegal or not but it could jeopardise their futures."

His comments came as the UN Human Rights Office for Southeast Asia criticised the authorities for a recent spate of instances where people were led away for questioning after making the salute.

Ongoing martial law makes any public demonstrations illegal and the military said it has no plans to lift the restrictions any time soon.

"It will stay until the country has peace and order," junta spokesman Col Werachon Sukondhapatipak said.

Chulalongkorn University rector Pirom Kamolratanakul suspended a seminar about the parliamentary system that would have been held by the university's Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies yesterday.

The reason for the seminar's suspension was that the event organiser had failed to seek prior approval from the ruling National Council for Peace and Order.

One of the organisers, Gotham Arya, said the seminar was only intended to explore views on the ideal parliament system, and he plans to seek approval from the NCPO to hold the event next month.

Anti-coup messages were also sprayed at seven locations near Meng Rai Maharat military camp in Chiang Rai.

The messages were found on Friday, a day before Interior Minister Anupong Paojinda delivered a lecture at Mae Fah Luang University.

Banners bearing similar anti-coup messages to the graffiti were put up on the buildings.

Panitan Wattanayagorn, an adviser to the deputy prime minister in charge of internal security affairs, said it would be worrisome if a growing number of political expressions against the government led to a new wave of conflict.

He said the government would not bar people from expressing opinions publicly, but it was screening for gestures that were deemed a threat to security or had a hidden agenda.

Gen Prawit Wongsuwan, deputy prime minister in charge of internal security affairs, had also instructed provincial authorities to step up surveillance, Mr Panitan said.

Mr Panitan said practical and honest views are welcome, but security officers may have to adjust their roles to better monitor changing political situations.

He said the National Reform Council in particular should observe the rules during the process of gathering opinions from political parties for reform.

He said there would be no problem if parties invited to the NRC expressed political views in a constructive debate over how the reforms will lead the country forward.

Mr Panitan said the NRC should intervene if the parties speak in a way that could re-ignite social conflicts. WITH AGENCIES