

Thais in the mood for love as V-Day fever sweeps the nation

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Babies dressed as cupids, underwater weddings and a government vitamin giveaway to encourage procreation were all part of Thailand's imaginative and bizarre events Tuesday to mark Valentine's Day.

The Land of Smiles embraces February 14 like few other countries in Southeast Asia, with Bangkok awash with pop-up flower stalls and a roster of romantic gestures unfurling across the country.

The junta government led the love-in, doling out heart-shaped boxes of free iron and folic acid supplements in a bid to help healthy pregnancies and stimulate the kingdom's birthrate.

"In 1970, a family had an average of six children but now it's 1.6," Wachira Pengjuntr, director-general of the Department of Health, told AFP.

"In the past people ate better food, more vegetables and fruits but now lifestyles have changed... so we want to encourage more births."

In the southern tourist hotspot of Trang, couples were offered the opportunity to marry underwater—in full wedding dress and diving gear—in an annual publicity stunt aimed at boosting visitor numbers.

And babies at one Bangkok maternity ward were dressed up with wings to resemble the god of love.

Even Thailand's fractious political arena, a stage more accustomed to the delivery of brickbats than bouquets, could not escape Cupid's arrow.

In a widely trailed "Day of Love", the junta opened reconciliation talks with some political players in an effort to bridge a decade of conflict that has seen two democratic governments upended by coups.

Thailand's normally stern Prime Minister Prayut Cha-O-Cha was also in an affectionate mood following a poll saying just over half the country wanted to give him flowers for Valentine's Day.

"I have love for everyone—all 70 million Thais every day—not only on Valentine's Day. I have roses for you everyday. Thank you," he told reporters.

Thai polling data is often criticised as politically slanted.

Still the junta's unbridled passion for Valentine's Day was a contrast to more po-faced approaches in previous years—in 2015 the generals urged young people to have a special meal or visit temples instead of having sex.

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