

Thai-Burma border reopens after weeks of tension

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On November 24, the 2,400 kilometre border between Thailand and Burma (Myanmar) was officially reopened after a seven week closure. Negotiations are now underway over the resumption of economic ties. The Burmese military junta closed the border in retaliation for Thailand's handling of the October 1 seizure of the Burmese embassy in Bangkok by five gunmen from the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors (VBSW). The Thai government negotiated an agreement with the students that saw them flown to the border and released without charges.

Thai Interior Minister Sanan Kachornprasart heightened the fury of Burma's military regime at the refusal of Thailand to apprehend and try the VBSW members by declaring: "We don't consider them to be terrorists. They are student activists who are fighting for democracy."

Cross border trade came to a standstill, with Burma blocking the Ranong crossing in the south, the major Friendship Bridge and the Mae Sai crossing in northern Thailand. According to the head of the Mae Sai Chamber of Commerce, Suchart Brirattana, the closure was costing Thai businessmen 25 million baht (\$US620,000) a day in lost trade in consumer goods, construction materials and gasoline.

As well as closing the border, Burma barred Thai fishing vessels from its waters. The fishing ban affected some 400 Thai trawlers licensed to fish in Burmese waters and up to 5,000 Burmese workers normally employed on the vessels. Sutha Theareephat, the head of the provincial Fisheries Department at the southern Thai port of Ranong, said that fishing and related businesses lost some 43 million baht (\$US1.1 million) a day.

Despite the economic impact on both countries, the Burmese ambassador to Thailand, U Hla Maung,

indicated on October 13 that the Rangoon regime was prepared to continue the closure indefinitely: "We want Thailand to arrest the five who stormed the Burmese Embassy and put them on trial here... The sooner the five are arrested, the sooner the border and the fishing problems will be solved".

With Thailand refusing to back down, a series of incidents heightened tensions:

- * On October 14, Thai troops clashed with unidentified, armed intruders from Burma at Ban Huay Pueng in Mae Hong Son province and at Ban Maisape.

- * A month-long joint US-Thai military exercise began on October 18 in the Mae Hong Son area near the border with Burma.

- * On October 22, Burmese troops arrested dozens of Thai gamblers in Koh Song, opposite Thailand's Ranong province, only releasing them after they paid a \$US1,200 fine.

- * On November 1, Burma lodged a protest against the intrusion of Thai warplanes into its airspace.

- * It was reported that Burma increased its troops from 10,000 to 30,000 in the Mae Hong Son area. Burmese military forces were also deployed to Tachilek, opposite Mae Sai, and to several other points near the border. Three patrol boats were seen deployed near Ranong.

- * On November 17, two Thai soldiers were wounded while clearing mines along the border, believed to have been laid by the Burmese military.

The border reopening is the result of a special visit to the Burmese capital of Rangoon by Thai Foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan to resolve the dispute before the opening of this weekend's meeting in the Philippines of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), of which both countries are members.

According to initial reports in the *Bangkok Post*,

Burma has “left it up to Thailand to deal with the five students according to Thai law”. There are indications that Burma is seeking a series of concessions from Thailand, including the waiving of import duties on Burmese agricultural products and the renegotiation of fishing contracts. Thailand has agreed to provide a low-interest loan to fund the construction of a road from the Thai city of Mae Sot to Burma, while the junta in Rangoon will allow tens of thousands of Burmese immigrant workers to be herded across the border by Thai officials.

While immediate tensions may have eased, developments since the embassy siege are suggestive of a change of attitude in Thailand toward its neighbour. The October 8 editorial in the *Bangkok Post* for example, under the headline of “Junta will never have our sympathy”, stated bluntly: “The Burmese leaders would do well to realise that the tide of history is against them and they would do well to help usher in democracy in their country or be swept aside.”

With the Burmese economy hovering on the brink of collapse, there has been a marked intensification in international pressure against the military junta, under the banner of democracy and human rights. Both the World Bank and the US State department have issued recent reports that link any economic aid to the lifting of restrictions on foreign investment, the opening of the country's markets and the implementation of political reforms.

The traditional stance of ASEAN has been that of “non-interference” in the internal affairs of other member countries. In the past, the Thai government has avoided overtly supporting the Burmese opposition movement or making public statements that could be interpreted as critical of Burmese junta.

Now the Thai government appears to be using the precedent set by ASEAN's involvement in the East Timor intervention to legitimise a shift in its relations with Burma. After considerable internal debate, Thailand contributed one of the largest ASEAN contingents sent to join the Australian-led Interfet force in the formerly Indonesian held territory.

In explaining the importance of Thai participation in the East Timor operation, foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan said: “East Timor may be small, but it has tremendous implications for the region. It's right in our midst. If the problem is allowed to fester, it will give an

impression of insecurity and lack of collective responsibility. The Prime Minister considered it was a good opportunity for countries in the region to show our responsibility.”

His deputy, Sukhumbhand Paribatra, elaborated further: “The dividing line between domestic affairs on the one hand and problems, which have transnational, regional or international consequence, is very thin.”



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