

Thai-Cambodian border clash driven by internal political tensions

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Border clashes between Thai and Cambodian troops took place over four consecutive days from February 4 to 7, near the thousand-year-old, World Heritage-listed Preah Vihear Hindu temple. A 1962 World Court ruling gave sovereignty of the site to Cambodia but control over a surrounding 4.2 square kilometre area has never been clearly demarcated.

The trigger for the clashes was Thai objections to a Cambodian boundary marker being placed in a disputed area and the placing of a Cambodian flag in a Buddhist pagoda near the Preah Vihear site. Small arms exchanges escalated into the use of heavy artillery and armoured vehicles.

The Cambodian government claimed in a letter sent Monday to the United Nations Security Council that Thai artillery shells had landed as far as 20 kilometres inside Cambodian territory, indicating the possibility of an escalation of the conflict. It alleged that five Cambodians had been killed and 45 injured. It also claimed that Thai shelling damaged a wall of the temple.

In their own letter to the Security Council, Thai authorities claimed that as many as 15,000 Thais living along the border had to be evacuated to escape Cambodian shelling and that two of its citizens had been killed and dozens more injured.

UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon expressed "grave concern". The United States called for both sides to exercise "restraint," while the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) warned that the clashes would undermine foreign investor confidence in the region and harm its economic prospects.

Under international pressure, fighting ended on Tuesday but the situation remains volatile and relations acrimonious. Both sides have blamed the other for starting the border dispute.

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva claimed that Thailand had responded to Cambodian incursions into the "very sensitive" area around the temple. In a bellicose statement, Abhisit declared: "This is the time I would like to see Thais united and supporting our military and soldiers who protect our sovereignty. I believe in our national anthem that Thais love peace but are prepared to fight."

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen warned that "Thailand's aggression" had put regional stability at risk and called for UN troops to be sent to the area. He said he would "welcome" ASEAN intervention to resolve the dispute. The Thai

government responded by condemning Hun Sen for seeking the "internationalisation" of the conflict.

The political elites of both Thailand and Cambodia have repeatedly used the border dispute to promote nationalistic fervour for domestic purposes. There have been a number of less serious border clashes since 2008.

The promotion of Khmer nationalism and anti-Thai sentiment undoubtedly has provided the Hun Sen regime with a welcome diversion. The Cambodian government was confronted last August and September with strikes by tens of thousands of workers in the garment industry—the country's largest export earner. New unrest has been developing this year over government demands that workers sign an anti-strike agreement in exchange for a small increase in the minimum wage.

Instability and political machinations within Thailand, however, appear to be the key factor behind the present border clashes

The incident that most contributed to the build-up of tensions occurred on December 29. In a clear provocation, seven supporters of the Thai nationalist Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) crossed into the territory under Cambodian control near the site and were detained. Among them was Panich Vikitsreth, a member of the Thai parliament and Abhisit's Democratic Party.

Panich and four others were fined, given suspended sentences and returned to Thailand. On February 1, however, the remaining two, prominent PAD leader Veera Somkwamkid and PAD activist Ratree Pipatanapaiboon, were convicted on espionage charges, illegal entry and entering a military base and sentenced to eight and five years' imprisonment respectively.

The harsh sentences may well have been retaliation for Bangkok not reining in PAD's campaign to promote anti-Cambodian sentiment. PAD "yellow shirt" protests, which have not attracted large crowds, had been demanding the release of the detained men, the revocation of a 2000 Thai-Cambodian border agreement and the forced removal of all Cambodians in the disputed area. PAD had accused the Abhisit government of being soft on Cambodia and conceding Thailand's territorial rights.

The official reaction of the Abhisit government had been to

ignore the PAD protests. When the sentences were handed down on the PAD members, Deputy Prime Minister for Security Affairs Suthep Thaugsuban said Thailand would respect the Phnom Penh court verdict.

On February 4, the day fighting broke out, Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya was in Cambodia to discuss the issues with his Cambodian counterpart Hor Namhong. In Thailand, Abhisit was delivering a major speech in which he promoted his government's economic and social policies and did not dwell on the border issue. He emphasised his government's welfare program, designed to win over the votes of the urban poor and rural electorate, and boasted that the Thai economy had done better since he gained office in December 2008 than most countries in the region.

The *Bangkok Post* headlined its coverage of the speech, "PM starts the election campaigning early". National elections are due by November but Abhisit has hinted they may be held as early as April.

The Thai military may have initiated the border clash with Cambodia without Abhisit's knowledge, in order to cut across any move to hold early elections. According to a February 8 article in *Asia Times Online*, Army commander General Prayuth Chan-ocha is opposed to Abhisit's plans because an election may lead to the victory of the opposition Puea Thai Party.

Puea Thai is the current political vehicle of the forces loyal to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whom the military ousted in a coup in September 2006 after months of anti-government protests organised by PAD.

Sections of Thai big business, along with the military hierarchy and political figures closely connected to the monarchy of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, had turned against Thaksin when he shifted from the protectionist economic policies he had promised when he was elected in 2001, after the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, and began to open the economy to more foreign competition and investment. Thaksin's orientation toward closer relations with China also caused concerns in the traditionally US-aligned ruling elite.

PAD was established by publishing tycoon Sondhi Limthongkul and other business interests vulnerable to Thaksin's turn in economic policy. Sondhi was soon joined by a raft of nationalists, including a bevy of ex-generals, and attracted the support of a largely middle class constituency for a protest campaign demanding Thaksin's resignation and new elections.

The armed forces, with the transparent backing of the monarchy, justified a coup on the grounds of restoring stability and imposed military rule for 14 months. Elections were not viewed as viable as Thaksin had built up an electoral base of support through economic concessions to the long-neglected rural masses and urban poor, in the form of cheap health care and village development fund loans.

Relying on this social base, the pro-Thaksin People Power

Party (PPP) won a clear majority of the vote in the December 2007 election and formed government. A new campaign of destabilisation was begun almost immediately, culminating in PAD protesters occupying Bangkok airport in November 2008. In December, the constitutional court was used to carry out another de-facto coup by outlawing the PPP and removing its pro-Thaksin prime minister, Somchai Wongsawat, from parliament. The military then pressured the PPP's coalition partners to join Abhisit's Democrats in a coalition government.

More than two years on, the political tensions have only intensified. The pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) organised mass protests in April and May last year, mobilising tens of thousands of rural supporters and urban poor to demand new elections. The military bloodily suppressed the "red shirt" demonstrations on May 19 and the UDD leadership called off mass action.

Abhisit had calculated that the UDD demobilisation following the army's crackdown, combined with the welfare measures he has promised to Thaksin supporters and the state of the economy would ensure he won an early election.

He had not counted, however, on the opening up of a rift between his government and the PAD nationalist elements. At a rally over the border clashes, PAD leaders, including Sondhi and General Chamlong Srimuang, called for the resignation of the Abhisit government for its failure to resolve the dispute with Cambodia in Thailand's favour.

Yesterday, with PAD supporters threatening to blockade major roads throughout Bangkok and disrupt parliament, Abhisit's cabinet invoked the Internal Security Act in seven districts of the city until February 23. The ISA gives police extraordinary arrest powers. According to the *Bangkok Post*, 50 companies of riot police have been deployed to suppress PAD activities.

With new instability in the streets of the Thai capital, Abhisit is less likely to proceed with an April election, giving the military establishment time to plot how to prevent any prospect of another pro-Thaksin victory.



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