

Renewed fighting on Thai-Cambodian border

John Roberts
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Thai and Cambodian troops have exchanged artillery and small arms fire for the past five days in disputed border areas. The clashes erupted last Friday near the ancient temples of Ta Kwai and Ta Muen, about 160 kilometres west of the Preah Vihear temple, where fighting took place in early February.

According to a Thai army statement on Monday, five Thai soldiers have been killed and 35 wounded. Some 25,000 civilians have been evacuated from Surin province and 4,500 from Buri Ram. The local Thai commander claimed that Cambodian forces had fired 10 artillery rounds into the village of Ban Nong Khan Na on Sunday.

Cambodian government spokesman Phay Siphon reported on Monday that six of its soldiers had been killed, with 13 injured and that thousands of civilians were being evacuated from the area. Phnom Penh has accused the Thai military of using gas-filled shells and cluster munitions—a claim the Thai military denies. Phay also implied that Thailand was escalating the conflict, with Thai F-16 fighters carrying out mock attacks on Cambodian positions.

Yesterday fighting spread to the Preah Vihear temple area, where Cambodian and Thai troops exchanged artillery and automatic rifle fire. “It’s the longest fighting today, now it has been going on for more than 7 hours, and it’s still continuing,” a local Cambodian official told the Chinese newsagency Xinhua on Tuesday night. No casualty figures were available.

Both sides blame the other for the clashes.

The Thai government claimed that Cambodian troops had intruded into the disputed area around the Ta Kwai temple, in violation of an agreement to keep it free of all troops. Army spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkamnerd said Cambodian troops had opened fire when challenged by Thai soldiers.

Cambodian spokesman Phay Siphon said the fighting erupted after Thai troops fired first. In a letter to the UN Security Council, Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong blamed the renewed fighting on Thailand’s reluctance to accept Indonesian observers in the border region. The Thai government had initially accepted the proposal in February but, under pressure from the military, backed away from the plan.

Calls by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for an end to the fighting appear to have been ignored. Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa planned to hold talks on Monday with the leaders of both countries, but called off his visit without explanation. The two defence ministers were due to hold ceasefire talks in Phnom Penh today, but Thailand cancelled the meeting.

Cambodia is clearly seeking to use the conflict in its bid to internationalise the border dispute, hoping that international mediation will favour its claims. In July 2008, in response to a Cambodian plan, UNESCO listed the Preah Vihear temple as a world heritage site. Thailand has disputed both the listing and Cambodian sovereignty over the area.

While it is not possible to tell which side sparked the clashes last Friday, the Thai military could well have been responsible. As with the clashes in February, the generals are using the latest fighting to put pressure on the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

In an ominous statement on Sunday, Thai army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha declared that it would be up to the government to decide to go to war with Cambodia over the border issue, adding that the army was ready to follow orders. He called for bilateral talks to resolve the conflict, but added: “If Cambodia doesn’t want to negotiate, then it will not be necessary for us to negotiate

either.” He reiterated that the armed forces did not agree “with having third party observers in the disputed border area”.

Abhisit used his weekly television address on Sunday to promise full government backing for the army. He declared that Thailand must not “fall into Cambodia’s trap” of internationalising the dispute. Abhisit faces ongoing protests from the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), a right-wing nationalist organisation with connections to sections of the military, accusing him of not taking a tough stand against Cambodia.

The Thai prime minister said he would use the scheduled Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit meeting in Jakarta on May 7-8 to hold talks with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. However, with neither side indicating any willingness to compromise, a resolution to the border confrontation is unlikely.

In comments to the *Financial Times*, political commentator Chris Baker pointed to the motivations behind the Thai military’s intransigent stance. “A lot of the army’s reason for getting prestige and money is tied with border disputes. There is a chance that this could escalate if the army thinks they can benefit from doing so, and they don’t want an election.”

The opposition of the Thai military to a national election goes to the heart of the protracted and ongoing political crisis in ruling circles. Sections of the military are concerned that an election could result in the victory of the opposition Puea Thai party, associated with former premier Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in September 2006.

The protracted feuding between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling elite led to the installation of Abhisit in late 2008 with the backing of the military and other layers of the country’s traditional elites, including the monarchy. At stake in the bitter factional brawling are sharp differences over economic policy and control of the state apparatus with its associated patronage.

Last May scores of pro-Thaksin demonstrators were killed when the army cracked down after months of protests demanding that Abhisit step down. Following the bloody confrontation, both sides backed off, fearing that

continuing political and social unrest could spiral out of their control. However, sections of the military, along with PAD, have been reluctant to accept any compromise with the pro-Thaksin faction. PAD has bluntly called for the election to be out off and for the installation of a new “capable” and “decisive” leader—an invitation for the military to intervene again.

The *Wall Street Journal* noted on Sunday that army commander Prayuth had filed criminal charges against several prominent opposition figures for allegedly insulting the monarchy. The article reported that several prominent Thai columnists had endorsed PAD’s demand for the government to call off the election.

According to the *Australian*, “coup rumours swept Bangkok” over the weekend. General Prayuth repeated previous denials stating: “The only thing we want to ask is for all parties not to violate the monarchy or bring the monarchy into their conflicts or get us involved in political conflicts.” Given the Thai military’s long record of coups, these words are no guarantee against a further intervention.

Abhisit yesterday made plain his intention to proceed with an early election despite the border conflict with Cambodia. Indicating that the election date could be announced next week, he told reporters: “The border problem will not affect the house dissolution because there will be a caretaker government which has full authority.”

Abhisit’s statement will only provoke hardline elements of the Thai military and their supporters and encourage them to ramp up the border war.

The author recommends:

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