

RegionalNews

Ancient temple dispute boils again

THAILAND AND CAMBODIA FACE DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE TO END A FRESH BOUT OF BORDER CLASHES

Thailand and Cambodia are facing growing diplomatic pressure to end an armed standoff on a stretch of border surrounding a 900-year-old clifftop temple as guns have held silent for several days.

Thailand and Cambodia blame each other for provoking intense exchanges of fire that killed at least three Thais and eight Cambodians since Feb 4. At least 34 Thais and 55 Cambodians were wounded, according to official statements from both sides.

Diplomats at the UN Security Council said it was possible the 15-nation body would discuss the issue next week after Washington, China and Southeast Asia's ASEAN regional grouping issued statements urging both sides to show restraint.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has called on both sides to "exercise maximum restraint".

"The secretary-general appeals to both sides to put in place an effective arrangement for cessation of hostilities and to exercise maximum restraint," Ban's office said.

China also expressed its concerns and called for calm and restraint.

"Both Cambodia and Thailand are friendly neighbors of China," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said on Monday. "China hopes that the two sides will keep calm and resolve the disputes through negotiations to prevent the escalation of tensions," he said.

Bilateral talks likely

Bilateral talks could take place in New York, possibly on Monday when Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya is to brief the Security Council, said his spokesman, Thani Thongpakdi. His Cambodian counterpart, Hor Namhong, is also due in New York.

"There is a possibility that the two will meet on the sidelines," said Thani, adding that this year's Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) chair, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, will also be in New York.

Thailand and Cambodia are both members of ASEAN, which plans to form a European-style single market by 2015 and has urged bilateral talks to end the fiercest fighting on the disputed border since the early 1990s, when Cambodia's Khmer Rouge forces operated in the area.

At the border, Thai and Cambodian soldiers have held fire since Feb 8 after a clash on Feb 4 set off four days of fighting in the 4.6-square-kilometer contested area around the Preah Vihear temple.

"The situation remains calm but what happens next depends on



A section of the Preah Vihear temple in Preah Vihear province, some 500 kilometers northwest of Phnom Penh.

AFP

the Thai troops," said Chea Dara, deputy commander of the Cambodian army.

Cambodian troops were continuing to dig trenches around the temple. Some soldiers said the number of Cambodians killed is likely higher than the government has indicated. They declined to be identified by name because they were not authorized to comment.

"There are many more deaths and injuries. People would be shocked," said one soldier, adding that his deputy commander was killed in a clash on Sunday when a Thai shell hit the area near their unit.

Their statements could not be immediately confirmed by the Cambodian government.

In Cambodia's northern frontier areas, schools and temples have been turned into makeshift refugee centers.

Reasons remain unclear

Reasons behind the fighting remain unclear. Some analysts say hawkish Thai generals and nationalist allies may be trying to topple Thailand's government or create a pretext to stage another coup and



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HONG LEI, CHINESE FOREIGN MINISTRY SPOKESMAN

cancel elections expected this year.

Others say it may be a breakdown in communication channels at a time of strained relations over Cambodia's flying of a national flag in the disputed area and laying of a stone tablet inscribed with "This is Cambodia."

The temple, known as Preah Vihear, or "Mountain of the Sacred Temple", in Cambodia, and Khao Phra Viharn in Thailand, sits on a triangular plateau that forms a natural border.

Both sides have been locked in a standoff since July 2008, when Preah

Preah Vihear temple

Border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over World Heritage temple

- Preah Vihear**
 - ▶ Built during Khmer regime in 11th century
 - ▶ Occupied by Thai troops from 1950 - 1962
 - ▶ Inside Cambodian territory according to World Court ruling 1962
 - ▶ Fresh dispute were sparked after UNESCO listed the temple as a World Heritage site in July 2008



Based on maps provided by Cambodian authorities
AFP Source: Cambodian Council of Ministers

Vihear was granted UNESCO World Heritage status, which Thailand opposed on grounds that territory around the temple had never been demarcated.

The International Court of Justice in 1962 awarded the temple to

Cambodia, which uses a century-old French map as the basis for its territorial claims, but the ruling failed to determine ownership of the scrub next to it.

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