Unlock
your potential with business solutions by Smart
Smart 5G
KHMER TIMES
JOB ANNOUNCEMENT
Urgent Hiring

National March 20, 2026

Online hostility spiked between Cambodians and Thais before outbreak of war, study finds

Som Sotheary / Khmer Times



File photo of Thai authorities intervening in a labour dispute between Cambodian workers and a Thai employer in Ayutthaya province, Thailand. Cambodian Embassy in Thailand

Click here to get Khmer Times Breaking News direct into your Telegram

Synopsis: Research reveals quarrels over history, culture, and national identity on social media deepened cross-border divisions months before armed conflict erupted between Cambodia and Thailand.

NEW FEATURE
ABA

A surge of nationalist hostility online between Cambodia and Thailand preceded last year's border conflict, research shows, warning that digital tensions between the two peoples had deepened divisions long before violence erupted between the military forces.

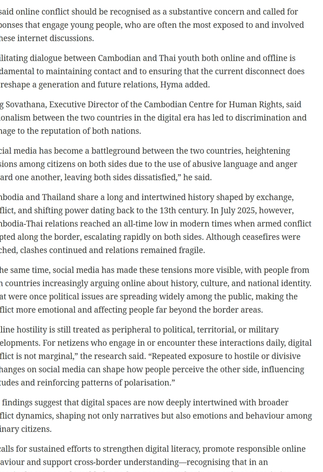
Data on digital nationalism and cross-border tensions published on Tuesday noted that social media platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok, and YouTube became arenas for heated disputes over history, culture, and national identity, creating a "digital ecosystem" where antagonism could escalate rapidly.

The study, led by researcher Raymond Hyma and partners Swisspeace, Women Peace Makers and Peace Developer, took a participatory action approach. Started in 2024, it involved 101 participants across both countries and leveraged a unique "Facilitative Listening Design" methodology.

The approach trained everyday Cambodians and Thais as researchers to capture conversations with peers, offering a rare, insider-led perspective on how online interactions shaped perceptions ahead of the armed conflict that erupted in July 2025.

Cambodian participants often said they felt hurt, dismissed, or attacked, while many Thai users described feeling annoyed or indifferent.

"Those emotional patterns matter because they harden identities in ways that make people less open to understanding the other side. When online tensions rose in 2025, social media didn't cause the armed violence, but it created a ready-made emotional climate/sentiment where people were already primed to see the other side as an adversary. That makes preventing escalation much harder," Women Peace Makers Executive Director Kry Suyheang.



A Khmer Times report highlights the furious and hateful comments exchanged online between Cambodians and Thais amid rising border tensions last year. Khmer Times

"Sustained hostile encounters online led some to hyper-engage in defending national identity, while others withdrew as a form of self-protection," the report notes, identifying a phenomenon researchers described as "digital hyper-engagement."

On the other hand, Thai participants more often coped by disengaging from contentious posts, scrolling past or ignoring debates entirely. This form of digital distance, referred to in the research as "digital apathy," allowed longstanding grievances to persist without challenge, while subtly reinforcing assumptions about legitimacy and national hierarchy.

"We cannot say escalating social media intensity predicted the 2025 border conflict," Hyma told Khmer Times. "But we can see how it has shaped general public attitudes and deeply affected how people now perceive each other."

He said online conflict should be recognised as a substantive concern and called for responses that engage young people, who are often the most exposed to and involved in these internet discussions.

Facilitating dialogue between Cambodian and Thai youth both online and offline is fundamental to maintaining contact and to ensuring that the current disconnect does not reshape a generation and future relations, Hyma added.

Seng Sovathana, Executive Director of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, said nationalism between the two countries in the digital era has led to discrimination and damage to the reputation of both nations.

"Social media has become a battleground between the two countries, heightening tensions among citizens on both sides due to the use of abusive language and anger toward one another, leaving both sides dissatisfied," he said.

Cambodia and Thailand share a long and intertwined history shaped by exchange, conflict, and shifting power dating back to the 13th century. In July 2025, however, Cambodia-Thai relations reached an all-time low in modern times when armed conflict erupted along the border, escalating rapidly on both sides. Although ceasefires were reached, clashes continued and relations remained fragile.

At the same time, social media has made these tensions more visible, with people from both countries increasingly arguing online about history, culture, and national identity. What were once political issues are spreading widely among the public, making the conflict more emotional and affecting people far beyond the border areas.

"Online hostility is still treated as peripheral to political, territorial, or military developments. For netizens who engage in or encounter these interactions daily, digital conflict is not marginal," the research said. "Repeated exposure to hostile or divisive exchanges on social media can shape how people perceive the other side, influencing attitudes and reinforcing patterns of polarisation."

The findings suggest that digital spaces are now deeply intertwined with broader conflict dynamics, shaping not only narratives but also emotions and behaviour among ordinary citizens.

Its calls for sustained efforts to strengthen digital literacy, promote responsible online behaviour and support cross-border understanding—recognising that in an increasingly connected world, the path to peace may begin not only at negotiation tables, but also in the everyday interactions unfolding on screens.

Information Ministry spokesman Tep Asnarith warned of the risks posed by irresponsible online behaviour, particularly during periods of national tension.

"Freedom of expression must go hand in hand with responsibility. In times of crisis, protecting national security and long term relations between neighbouring peoples requires every social media user to act responsibly. Social media is like a double edged sword — powerful for rapid information and connection, but able to inflame tensions and produce serious short and long term harms if used irresponsibly."

He noted that fake news, hostile language and manipulated content—particularly relating to border issues—have contributed to misunderstanding and anger among the public.

The Ministry of Information recorded nearly 4,000 cases of false information in 2025, including around 1,700 linked to border tensions and more than 50 cases involving AI-generated content.

The consequences of unchecked online hostility were not hypothetical. A high-profile case reviewed by Meta Platforms in 2025 involved a Facebook post in Thai urging employers to "Stop hiring Khmer people."

The Oversight Board later ordered a takedown after ruling the content violated Meta's Hateful Conduct policy. The post appeared amid border clashes that caused deaths and displacement, fuelling fear among Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand. Thousands reportedly returned to Cambodia over concerns of discrimination and potential violence.

Licadho Operations Director Am Sam Ath said the misuse of social media—whether it violates ethical standards, disrespects others' rights, or shows disregard for nationality or religion—can create hostility between individuals and countries, potentially leading to conflict or even war.

"The use of digital technology for expression should be guided by ethics to ensure it does not harm any nationality, religion, or culture," he said. "Therefore, greater education and awareness are essential to prevent such risks, so that society can live in peace while respecting human rights."

Cambodia shares more than 800 kilometres of land border with Thailand, stretching from Preah Vihear province in the north to Koh Kong in the southwest. This border has long been a source of territorial disputes.

FTB
Show FTB KHEYS
to receive payment
from all financial industry
of Bakong member
Google Play
App Store
FTB
023 862 111

KB PRASAC Bank
អត្រាការប្រាក់ទុកល្អ
តាមតម្លៃសមរម្យសម្រាប់ខ្លួនអ្នក
ចាប់ផ្តើម
ចាប់ផ្តើម
ទទួលបានប្រាក់
ពីប្រព័ន្ធធនាគារ
086 999 911

Khmer Times
Real Stories • Real Inspiration
Success Mantras
Educational Triumphs
Fulfilled Lifestyles
November
14
First feature drops November 14
Stay tuned to see who's inspiring the nation!
www.khmertimeskh.com

FREEHOLD FARM
LAND FOR SALE
LIMITED OPPORTUNITY
22HA | HARD TITLES
Asking price.
$20,000.00 per ha
or nearest offer.
Price includes
title transfer.
Contact: (+855) 92 888 666

Explainer



Can Cambodia secure tariff-free US market access amid MFN+0% hurdle?

As Washington prepares to conclude a separate investigation that could trigger another tariff on Cambodian exports, the Royal Government is seeking to secure a Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) tariff with zero additional duty (0%).

How the AI revolution is coding Cambodia's next era

Cambodia is entering a new stage of digital transformation, with government institutions, businesses and educational organisations showing growing interest in how artificial intelligence (AI) can contribute to the Kingdom's future development.

How sustainability drives Cambodia's business growth

As Cambodia's economy becomes increasingly connected to regional and global markets, businesses are facing rising expectations to operate responsibly, sustainably and transparently. Beyond financial performance, companies are now being assessed on how they manage their environmental, social and governance responsibilities.

Grounded growth: What's blocking Cambodia's tourism recovery?

Going by the latest statistics, the overall scenario of the tourism sector presents a grim outlook with international arrivals failing 47.9 percent to 1.75 million in the first half of 2026, down from 3.36 million a year earlier.

Can Cambodia's new reform push secure its place in global economy?

As the global economy navigates an increasingly complex landscape marked by geopolitical tensions, trade fragmentation, shifting supply chains and slowing growth, Cambodia is accelerating an ambitious reform agenda aimed at reinforcing investor confidence and positioning the Kingdom as one of the most competitive investment destinations in the region.

Post-LDC, Cambodia aspires to become self-reliant and competitive

Come December 2029, a new chapter shall make way into the annals of Cambodian history when the country graduates from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status.

More Explainers ▶▶

Beyond Business

Forever partners: The beautiful journey of a lasting love story (VIDEO)

For Chon Thai and Em Savan, marriage was never a promise of blue, cloudless skies. It was an unspoken vow to hold the umbrella together when the storms rolled in.

Serei Sopheak: A lifelong mission for Cambodia's future (VIDEO)