Thailand-Cambodia Clash Deflecting Domestic Woes

By SIMON ROUGHNEEN

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BANGKOK — Since Friday morning, fighting along the Thai-Cambodia border has left 12 soldiers dead and forced the evacuation of thousands of civilians on both sides of the frontier. This comes two months after four days of fighting left 11 people dead at a separate location along the border.

The latest bout of shelling began at around 6 am on Friday along the border where Thailand’s Surin Province faces Oddar Meanchey in Cambodia. Both sides blame each other for shooting first. Thailand says that Cambodia plans a ground offensive to take control of two temples, while Cambodia claims that its adversary has used chemical weapons and sent fighter aircraft into Cambodia’s airspace. Both sides deny the respective allegations.

It was the first fighting since February 4-7, when 12 people were killed near a 900-year-old Hindu temple called Preah Vihear. The temple was built by the same Khmer Empire that constructed Angkor Wat, the world’s largest religious structure. Angkor Wat draws around two million tourists per annum and sits near Siem Reap in Cambodia’s northwest.

In 1962, the International Court of Justice put Preah Vihear inside Cambodia. However Thai nationalists dispute the decision, with tensions intensifying after the site received World Heritage site status in 2008. The Thai government says that the land around the temple has not been demarcated, and that the status of the temple cannot therefore be denoted until the land issue is resolved.

The current conflict is taking place around 100 miles west of Preah Vihear, and similarly revolves around sovereignty over temples and the adjoining land. The situation has apparently remained calm around Preah Vihear, site of previous fighting between the two countries.

The clash has sparked other controversies. Thailand was criticized for alleged use of cluster bombs—which are banned by many countries—during the February fighting. A campaign group called the Cluster Munition Coalition said it found unexploded ordinance inside Cambodia, near where fighting took place. Thailand acknowledged the use of cluster bombs in the February fighting, but said that their weapons were not among those covered by international agreements on cluster bombs.

Both countries are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), currently
headed by Indonesia. Jakarta's Foreign Minister Marty Natelagawa has sought to mediate between the two countries since the February clashes, but Thailand has been cool to Indonesia's offer to send impartial monitors to the border region.

Cambodia wants the Indonesians in place, but Mr Natelagawa canceled scheduled visits to Phnom Penh and Bangkok today without giving any reason. The fighting could overshadow the upcoming ASEAN summit in Jakarta in early May, when it is likely that Thai PM Abhisit Vejajjva and Cambodian counterpart Hun Sen will come face-to-face.

While the unresolved border row remains volatile, some analysts speculate that there are domestic political issues involved in the international dispute. Ou Virak, head of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said that the fighting appears to be a cynical political ploy on the part of both governments to satisfy nationalist sentiment.

Last Thursday, police in Phnom Penh beat protestors demonstrating against forced evictions, after around half of the 4,000 residents living close to Boeung Kak Lake in the city were driven from their homes to make way for a Chinese-backed property development project. Human rights groups say that the Cambodian government is trying to restrict freedom of association, not only by coercing protestors but by establishing a series of new laws for the establishment of NGOs and trade unions.

Cambodia's main opposition leader Sam Rainsy lives in exile in Paris and faces several jail terms at home. Charges against Mr Rainsy include accusing the country's current Foreign Minister Hor Namhong of membership of the Khmer Rouge, and allegedly publishing a false map of the Cambodia-Vietnam border.

Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited Phnom Penh over the weekend while fighting continued at Cambodia's western border for talks about trade and investment. Vietnam occupied much of Cambodia for the decade following its 1979 invasion, which removed the Khmer Rouge regime from power after four years of rule left around two million Cambodians dead. The four surviving Khmer Rouge leaders are due to stand trial later this year at the internationally-backed court set up to mediate war crimes.

Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's former prime minister and seen by many as the de facto leader of Thailand's opposition, is also in exile after fleeing corruption charges. In late 2009, the Cambodian Government riled its Thai counterpart by offering Mr Thaksin a role as an 'economic advisor' and comparing the billionaire former telecommunications entrepreneur to Burmese democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi.

Meanwhile, a brief lapse in TV signals last Thursday, the evening before the border fighting re-started, sparked new rumors about a coup in Thailand. Army chief Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha
denied that a military takeover was being planned, with Thailand expected to hold elections during the coming summer.

Army leaders have warned politicians not to refer to the country's monarchy during the election campaign, and hit Redshirt leaders with lese majeste charges last week. This all comes less than a year after central Bangkok became an urban war zone, with Thai troops eventually over-running the two-month long Redshirt demonstration on May 19, 2010. Ninety-one people"”mostly civilians"”were killed during the two-month stand off, with little by way of information on who was responsible for the deaths coming from the Thai government in the intervening period.

Sodsri Sattayatham, a member of Thailand's Election Commission, said on Monday that the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia might affect Thailand's upcoming vote. While a date for the election has not been set, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejajjiva says he plans to dissolve parliament in early May, with an election to follow in late June or early July.

Paul Chambers, a military analyst at the University of Heidelberg, told The Irrawaddy that in both Cambodia and Thailand, the military and civilian leadership do not see eye-to-eye on border policy. He believes that in Cambodia "local army commanders were more pragmatic and willing to accede to a peace with their Thai military counterparts than was civilian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has sought to fan the flames of nationalism to bolster his rule."" In Thailand, according to Mr Chambers, the military leadership and nationalist factions are pushing a confrontational approach, with the army "unwilling to put up with any interference from the Thai civilian leadership""with regard to Thai border policy."" However, Thai Army chief Gen Prayuth said earlier today that the military would adhere to the government's orders.

The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or 'Yellowshirts', have called on voters to spoil their vote in the election, after previously suggesting a five year period of appointed government. The PAD continues to protest against the Thai government's handling of the border issue, saying that a more hardline stance is needed.

The latest PAD protest has drawn no more than 3,000-4,000 people so far"”much reduced from the tens of thousands that occupied Thailand's Government House and Bangkok's international airports in 2008. Those demonstrations presaged the ousting of the government led by allies of Thaksin, who won the last Thai election held in 2007. That vote came in the year after Thailand's last military coup, which took place in September 2006, while then-PM Thaksin was attending a United Nations summit in New York, and after yet more Yellowshirt protests against Thaksin.

Thai Deputy PM Suthep Thaugsuban says that there is potential for a prolonged conflict on the
Within Cambodia, a young population—"with no memory of Cambodia's violent recent history"
are "fiercely nationalistic and easily mobilized for war," according to Emma Leslie of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies in Phnom Penh.