PHNOM PENH - Fighting along the Thai-Cambodian border continued over the weekend after two agreed ceasefires broke down last week. At least 17 people have been killed and 50,000 evacuated on both sides of the border since the latest round of armed skirmishes and diplomatic salvos commenced on April 22. Some analysts now wonder whether the sustained armed clashes could eventually escalate into full-blown war.

As with past clashes, both governments have accused each other of instigating the conflict. In a statement on April 27, the Cambodian Council of Ministers denounced Thailand for its "naked and blatant aggression" that had resulted in "immense misery and suffering" for the Cambodian people. A day earlier, the Thai cabinet passed a three-point resolution authorizing "retaliatory military action" to push Cambodian troops out of disputed areas.

While it may be impossible to know who fired the first shots, many analysts agree that the conflict is an outgrowth of political turmoil in Thailand, reflecting an attempt by the Royal Thai Army to cement its position at the center of Thai politics ahead of elections set to be held by July. What is less clear are the factors driving decision-making on the other side of the border, where Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) have long maintained a stranglehold on domestic politics.

Since the military coup that overthrew former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, Cambodia's strongman has played a cameo role in Thailand's unfolding domestic drama, alternatively courting and sniping at a succession of Thai leaders. Occasionally he has taken center stage, as when he appointed Thaksin as an economic advisor in late 2009, plunging relations with Bangkok to their lowest point in years. At the time, some analysts speculated that the wily leader was backing Thaksin and his proxies in a future election, laying the groundwork for a more solid bilateral relationship further down the road.

Hun Sen has also clearly welcomed the ongoing conflict with Thailand as a chance to rally support and further marginalize his political opponents. Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights and a Phnom Penh-based political observer, said the contested Preah Vihear temple - a potent symbol, like Angkor Wat, of Cambodia's nationhood - has already been a source of much political capital for Hun Sen.

After the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization announced its World Heritage Site listing on July 7, 2008, over Thai objections the government trumpeted its "achievement" with a massive free concert at Phnom Penh's Olympic Stadium. The patriotic sentiment boosted the CPP in that month's national elections, which it won in a landslide, clinching 90 of the National Assembly's 123 seats. Billboards featuring a photo of Preah Vihear temple sitting under a Cambodian flag have since become a common sight across the country.

"Hun Sen has played pretty well with the national sentiment and he benefited quite a lot during the 2008 election. That was the beginning," Ou Virak said. He added that with each fresh outbreak of fighting, Cambodians tended to "look to the strongman" for protection.

Some have argued the fighting has also provided an opportunity for Hun Sen to boost the political credentials of his son Hun Manet, who he is reportedly grooming as a powerful military ally and possible prime ministerial successor. Hun Manet, a West Point graduate who was this year promoted to deputy commander of the Cambodian infantry, was reported to have commanded troops at Preah Vihear during...
February's clashes.

There is no clear evidence that he was involved in the latest round of hostilities, though the Bangkok Post reported on May 2 that Hun Manet had spoken on radio in Anlong Veng and Samrong, two districts close to the border, offering "a house and five rai [1,600 square meters] of land" to anyone willing to join the military and fight against Thailand.

Superior firepower

Given Thailand's overwhelming military superiority - in 2009, Bangkok spent US$2.9 billion on its military compared to Cambodia's $191 million, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute - Hun Sen is walking a fine line. The prime minister is playing a "very high stakes game" with a powerful neighbor, Ou Virak said, and had to be careful not to let the border situation get out of his control.

In a statement last week, self-exiled opposition leader Sam Rainsy wrote that Cambodia risked war because of "the aggression from Thailand associated with the incapability of the Hun Sen government to peacefully resolve a border conflict". The Sam Rainsy Party president said the simmering conflict with Thailand helped mask more pressing domestic issues, such as persistent rights abuses and corruption, and drew attention away from alleged border incursions by Vietnam along the country's eastern border.

"We must not allow the Hun Sen government to use the conflict with Thailand in the west as a political ploy to divert the attention and the anger of the Khmer people from the aggression by Vietnam in the east," wrote Rainsy, who has been sentenced to a total of 12 years in jail on charges stemming from his campaign to expose the alleged incursions by Hanoi, the CPP's long time political patron.

Another problem, Ou Virak pointed out, is that Hun Sen and the CPP are taking considerable risks for what amounts to a series of diminishing returns: the party already maintains a stranglehold on power, and faces an opposition that is increasingly divided and cowed by legal assaults and political maneuvering. Few doubt that the CPP will again prevail in next year's commune council elections and national polls set for 2013.

Given his fundamentally weak position vis-a-vis Thailand, Hun Sen's recent public speeches on the issue have mixed his trademark fiery rhetoric with calls for negotiations to end the conflict. In an address on April 27, Hun Sen proposed that ceasefire talks be held during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Jakarta on May 7-8, but could not help back-ending the speech with some invective against his Thai counterpart, Abhisit Vejjajiva.

"I have never met a Thai prime minister as bad as Abhisit. He was cruel, ordered the attack on Cambodia and threatened to take control of Cambodia," the Phnom Penh Post quoted him as saying. The premier then ended with a warning in an aphorism: "Cambodia is poor and small but our weapons are not like a slingshot, and don't forget that the ant can hurt the elephant."

Puangthong Pawakapan, an analyst based at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, said Hun Sen might also be bidding to force Thailand to accept third-party mediation to the Preah Vihear conflict, with the ultimate aim of safeguarding the country's UNESCO listing - something the Abhisit government has said it will try to have reversed.

"I believe his main concern was to have the Thai government stop interfering with the temple inscription and development plan," she said, suggesting that may also have prompted Hun Sen's controversial appointment of Thaksin as an advisor. "He probably believed that as long as Abhisit remained prime minister, it was hard for Cambodia to solve the issue with Thailand."

Given the nationalistic forces at play on the Thai side, however, even the formation of a stable, pro-Thaksin government after the scheduled elections is unlikely to bring an end to the border conflict.
Puangthong said that the nationalistic People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protest group will be waiting in the wings, ready to take to the streets if they fear the government is failing to defend Thai territory.

"As long as Thai politics is highly polarized and no government could gain trust and respect from all major political factions", she said, "a peaceful solution for the border dispute is difficult to achieve".

**Sebastian Strangio** is a journalist based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. He can be reached at sebastian.strangio@gmail.com.

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