Safety fears for Thai fair

Monday, 16 May 2011 15:02
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THE Minister of Commerce has postponed a major Thai trade exhibition planned for this week in Phnom Penh, claiming the exhibition’s safety could not be guaranteed.

In a letter addressed to the Charge d’Affaires of the Royal Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh, Minister of Commerce Cham Prasidh said the ministry would contact the Thai organisers to postpone the event until a “more favourable time comes”.

Highlighting restrictions on border trade imposed by Thai Military Region 2, he said: “I am of the opinion that this is not the right time to promote Thai products in Cambodia. We cannot guarantee the reaction of Cambodian visitors to such exhibition after such bad behaviour.”

The Thai 2nd Army Command had banned exports of fuel and other products it said the Cambodian military may need to support their troops in operations against Thai forces, according to The Bangkok Post. The order was intended for customs officials at the Chong Chom checkpoint, the Thai side of the O’Smach border crossing in Oddar Meanchey province, the report said.

Jiranan Wongmongkol, commercial counsellor based at the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh, said yesterday she would “follow government policy” when asked about the Ministry of Commerce letter, dated May 13, to postpone the 2nd Thailand Trade Exhibition 2011.

She maintained that bilateral trade continued as normal.

Earlier this month, she said plans to hold the trade fair, scheduled for May 19 to 22 at Phnom Penh’s Diamond Island Exhibition Centre, were on track despite the resumption of violence on the border in April.

Carlyle Thayer, politics professor at the University of New South Wales in Australia, said the temporary loss of the exhibition was unlikely to have a major impact on Thailand and that it was “more symbolic than real”.

Minister of Commerce Cham Prasidh
But if the Kingdom was trying to use economic means to hurt its neighbour, that plan may backfire, he said.

“If this thing escalates, Cambodia will lose more” because of its large trade deficit with Thailand, Thayer said, adding it was one of the “needling activities” both countries have employed throughout the recent conflict.

Cambodian Centre for Human Rights President Ou Virak said he believes an escalation becomes increasingly possible the longer the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand lasts, with trade becoming more likely to be used as a weapon.

“The potential for a further escalation of this conflict, and spilling into an economic one, is real. The economic impact will be huge,” he said.

Ou Virak said the Thai army’s decision to block fuel exports was “unfortunate”, given that Thai and Cambodian small-business owners are most likely to be hurt – and not the Cambodian Royal Armed Forces.

“The skirmishes are now claiming more victims – this time the business owners, workers and consumers,” he said.

Thai Foreign Ministry Spokesman Thani Thongpakdi could not be reached for comment.