On the borderline
An ancient temple on the border between Thailand and Cambodia is at the heart of a deadly territorial dispute.
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An ancient temple on the border between Thailand and Cambodia is at the heart of a deadly territorial dispute, creating some of the fiercest fighting in southeast Asia for years.

Twenty-seven people have been killed since February in clashes along the border, while many more have been injured and tens of thousands of villagers have been forced to flee.

Both governments claim ownership of the 4.6 square kilometres of land surrounding the temple. But some say nationalism and domestic politics are the real driving forces behind the conflict.

On this edition of 101 East, we go to both sides of the borderline to look at the fight for Preah Vihear.

Who suffers the most from the conflict?
By Ou Virak, the president of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights

The hostilities over Preah Vihear and other border temples have become a rallying point for nationalist sentiment in both Cambodia and Thailand. While uncertainty remains as to the cause of the recent clashes, nationalist forces in both countries have used the issue to score political points.

The extents to which both governments have gone to paint the other as the cause of these tensions have been to the detriment of civilians on either side of the border who have borne, and who continue to bear, the brunt of this cynical and politicised conflict.

The clashes, which were previously confined to the area surrounding Preah Vihear temple, spread in pockets in April and May this year along a 150 kilometre stretch of the shared border. Given the fragility of the peace between the two countries, hundreds of thousands of civilians on either side of this stretch of the border now live in constant fear of displacement resulting from any resumption of hostilities.

As the geographical scope of the clashes increased, so too did their intensity and the resulting humanitarian fallout. While a clash at Preah Vihear in April 2009 resulted in the temporary relocation of 1,660 civilians on the Cambodian side of the border, it is reported that as many as 85,000 civilians on either side of the border were displaced as a result of the most recent series of clashes.

Of even greater concern are the nefarious tactics and weapons that have been used. When hostilities broke out in February this year, Cambodia shelled a residential area 10 kilometres inside Thai territory killing one civilian and damaging seven homes and a school. In response to this attack, Thailand fired shells 27 kilometers into Cambodian territory and resorted to the use of cluster munitions — justified, according to Thai sources, on the basis of Cambodia's resort to indiscriminate shelling.

The widening geographical scope of the conflict is such that its consequences are being felt by an ever greater number of civilians. The use of indiscriminate tactics places these people in the firing line. While civilians have returned to their homes, they live in constant fear of a resumption of hostilities. It is only when the Cambodian and Thai governments put their people before politics and resolve this issue peacefully and conclusively that any semblance of normalcy can return to civilian life at the border.