

The ancient temples under fire in an age-old conflict

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As gunfire crackles and grenades explode along a disputed stretch of the Thailand-Cambodia border, diplomats are anxiously seeking an end to clashes that have left 12 people dead and forced almost 50,000 into emergency evacuation centres.

Gunfire and explosions could be heard again yesterday on a remote stretch of the border, close to two 12th-century temples claimed by both sides, as the bloodiest conflict between the two neighbours in two decades entered its fourth day. Later, firing intensified, dashing expectations of a quick end to the clashes.

Thailand's Foreign Minister had called for one-on-one talks, but he later appeared to back away from his comments as the clashes worsened.

His appeal came after a senior regional envoy, responsible for brokering an earlier peace deal between the two sides, cancelled a planned visit to the two countries. The Indonesian Foreign Minister, Marty Natalegawa, chairman of the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean), of which Thailand and Cambodia are members, said the opportunity for talks still existed. "The possibility is not closed for a direct meeting among the three of us ... The important thing is that communication continues," he said.

There is confusion over what triggered the clash between the two countries, whose relationship has long been strained. The exchanges have been concentrated in a heavily mined area around the temple sites Ta Moan and Ta Krabey on Cambodia's northern border, where the Cambodian military has been accused of building bases and where gunfire first broke out on Friday. Both sides accuse the other of firing first.

The exchanges followed an earlier clash last February around Preah Vihear, another temple complex 90 miles to the east. Disagreements over that temple date from at least 1962 when the complex - used only a decade ago as the location for the last hold-out by Khmer Rouge rebels - was awarded to Cambodia by the International Court of Justice. Tensions had earlier flared in 2008 when the UN bestowed World Heritage Status upon the site, which Cambodia hopes could become a major source of foreign income.

The most recent clashes have damaged the temples and villages located 12 miles inside the border. About 17,000 people had been evacuated, Cambodian officials said, and a school and at least 10 houses were destroyed. For its part, the Thai government said 30,000 people had been moved away from the border area and put in temporary camps.

Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary general, has called for dialogue between the two sides. "The secretary general calls on both sides to exercise maximum restraint and to take immediate measures to put in place an effective and verifiable ceasefire," said his spokesman, Martin Nesirky.

Such a prospect had been held out by Thailand's Foreign Minister, Kasit Piromya. But when clashes markedly intensified shortly before sunset yesterday, Mr Kasit accused Cambodia of being the aggressor and said that Thailand was now limiting the scope for talks. "It's clear Cambodia was pushing into the area and it's now beyond talks as friendly neighbours," he told reporters in Bangkok on his return from a visit to an evacuation camp near the border.

The clashes probably have as much to do with domestic political concerns as they do with the disputed scraps of land in remote jungle. Thailand's Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, has to call an election before the end of July. While he is expected to win he faces a tough challenge from opponents and Red Shirts supporters, many of whom follow the former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was forced from office in 2006.

For Mr Abhisit and his Democrat Party, the clashes with Cambodia are an opportunity to cement support within nationalist elements of the country. During his weekly television address over the weekend, Mr Abhisit said: "When there is firing into Thailand, we must fire back. We must not fall into Cambodia's trap in trying to spread a picture of conflict, or say the conflict is unsolvable through bilateral talks."

Duncan McCargo, professor of South-east Asian politics at the University of Leeds, suggested that the border dispute was essentially the result of an ongoing struggle between Thailand's military, its foreign ministry and the Prime Minister's office. "In the past, the Thai army has always demanded the right to pursue an independent foreign policy to advance its own ends. By prosecuting this bizarre and pointless border war, the military is trying to present itself as the true guardian of the national interest, seizing the moral high ground from civilian politicians," he said. "However, the conflict is further eroding Thailand's international credibility and is proving a headache to both Asean and the UN. The sooner the Thai military accepts that foreign policy is the preserve of elected governments, the better."

At the same time, the Cambodian government, headed by Prime Minister Hun Sen, has repeatedly clashed with the Thai authorities, to the extent that Mr Thaksin was briefly sought out as an economic adviser, a move seen as being undertaken solely to antagonise Mr Abhisit and his colleagues. The premier has used every opportunity to blame Thailand for what is happening.

P.S.

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