



Photo by: AFP ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan (centre) talks to reporters at the APEC Foreign Ministerial Meeting in Singapore ahead of the 21-nation Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum this weekend.

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SINGAPORE

SENIOR leaders in the region are urgently discussing how to defuse the rising tension between Cambodia and Thailand, ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan said on Wednesday.

Speaking at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Diplomacy in Singapore, Surin said the war of words that has flared between Phnom Penh and Bangkok over the arrival in Cambodia of Thai former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra has caused deep concern among regional leaders.

It is feared that the bilateral animosity could affect the inaugural US-ASEAN summit on Sunday, which will be attended by US President Barack Obama on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, which is currently being held in Singapore.

To prevent that, Surin said, “the highest levels of diplomacy are going on right now in this city to deal with the matter”.

“In ASEAN, we all feel collectively that there is a need to calm down before we meet President Obama,” he said during a keynote address.

Surin said both sides in the dispute will need help to resolve the matter, and the landmark meeting with the US leader will provide the other eight ASEAN leaders an opportunity to

collectively help to cool tempers in Phnom Penh and Bangkok.

“They both need a leg up in order to help them climb down,” said Surin.

Whenever nationalistic sentiment is fanned, such as happened over the disputed Preah Vihear temple, the concerned parties ultimately regret it, he said.

“So, to me, there is now a window of opportunity in Singapore for us to help the two sides to calm down.”

Koy Kuong, spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said Thursday that Cambodia supports any means of resolving the dispute, including multilateral ones. “Cambodia does not oppose the initiative proposed by Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan ... so long as the Thais agree to it,” he said.

However, after a meeting of Thailand’s National Security Council on Thursday, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva was quoted as saying the conflict “will not be discussed at the ASEAN level”.

Thani Thongphakdi, deputy spokesman for the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that in principle, Bangkok saw the issue as a bilateral one that “should be worked out and resolved bilaterally”.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” he said, in response to the prospect of a third country raising the issue in a multilateral forum.

“A number of countries, I think, may have expressed their views, but I don’t think any country has proposed that it be raised in a regional or multilateral forum.”

However, some say ASEAN mediation may be the only way out of the current impasse, which has seen both countries withdraw their ambassadors and threaten further escalation.

“ASEAN is the only regional institution that can bring the kind of solution that both countries need, because bilateral negotiations and dialogue have not worked,” said Chheang Vannarith, executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace.

“I think that this would be a win-win situation for Cambodia and Thailand if ASEAN plays a strong role. Both of them listen to ASEAN.”

Other observers remained less optimistic. Andrew Walker, a Thailand expert based at the Australian National University in Canberra, said that in the case of a simple dispute, a mediator such as ASEAN could help both Bangkok and Phnom Penh save face, but that the nature of the current dispute makes it especially resistant to outside mediation.

He said the dispute is complicated by the extreme political polarisation in Thailand, which has “energised” the dispute between the two countries.

“In Thailand, there is a very fundamental political polarisation,” he said. “I’m pessimistic about the prospect for external mediation because this dispute is a result of internal political dynamics.”

Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Diplomacy, noted on Wednesday that the one great achievement of the European Union had been not only to prevent wars between its member states but also to eliminate the potential for war.

“In ASEAN, however, we have not yet eliminated that potential for war between member states. That potential remains,” he said.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY SEBASTIAN STRANGIO, JAMES O’TOOLE AND THE BANGKOK POST