

Thais to send letter clarifying Thaksin status

Written by James O'Toole

Wednesday, 28 October 2009 15:05

THAILAND will send a diplomatic note to Cambodia to “clarify” the legal status of deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Tuesday as about 100 Thai protesters converged outside the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok to decry Prime Minister Hun Sen’s show of support for the exiled former leader.

Hun Sen last week offered a safe haven in Cambodia to Thaksin, suggesting that the fugitive billionaire serve as his economic adviser. Thaksin was ousted in a 2006 coup and self-exiled to avoid a jail term on corruption charges.

The Thai government, which hosted Hun Sen and other regional leaders at the 15th ASEAN summit in the resort town of Hua Hin, said it would pursue extradition of Thaksin if he sought refuge on Cambodian soil. The Cambodian government, however, responded on Friday by issuing a statement that it would not comply.

Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs deputy spokesman Thani Thongphakdi said Bangkok suspects Hun Sen is “misinformed” about Thaksin and will therefore send a letter clarifying the ex-prime minister’s legal status “hopefully by the end of this week”.

“We just wanted to make sure that the Cambodian side and Hun Sen have all the relevant facts at hand,” Thani said, explaining that the communique will consist of “an information paper detailing all the facts and the latest status of the legal cases related to the former prime minister for the information of the Cambodian side”.

Thai Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban met with Hun Sen on Saturday at the ASEAN summit to “update him on the situation” regarding Thaksin, Thani added.

Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Koy Kuong said Thailand was welcome to communicate further about Thaksin through diplomatic channels.

“It’s up to the Thai side if they want to send a note or more information about that,” he said, declining to comment on whether the Cambodian government felt it had been misinformed about Thaksin.

Panitan Wattanayagorn, the deputy secretary general to the Thai prime minister on political affairs, said Sunday that his government has a duty to ensure that cases involving Thai nationals in Cambodia are handled according to bilateral agreements, adding that Thai authorities are unsure of Thaksin’s present location.

“For the time being, we are not able to confirm the whereabouts of this particular person,” he said.

‘Insulting to all Thais’

At the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok, protest leader Chaiwat Sinsuwong, a leading member of the anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirt movement, told the crowd that Hun Sen’s remarks had “shown hostility” to Thailand and had interfered in the

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country's internal affairs. "His comments were insulting to all Thais and destroyed bilateral relations," Chaiwat said.

Thai police tightened security around the embassy, placing about 150 officers on guard for the rally, which dispersed without violence after two hours, district police commander Samit Choensa-ard said.

Chheang Vannarith, executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, said Thaksin's presence in Cambodia would prompt further demonstrations of this sort and "may harm the Cambodians living and working in Thailand".

Diplomatically, however, there would be little recourse for the government of Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to pursue Thaksin if Cambodia were to deny his extradition, said Josh Kurlantzick, a Southeast Asia expert with the Council on Foreign Relations.

"I don't think Abhisit really has many options here, if Thaksin is on Cambodian soil," he said Saturday.

In a statement released on Tuesday afternoon, the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh sought to quash speculation that the morning's protest had gotten out of control.

"The Thai embassy in Cambodia would like to dispel the rumour that there was a demonstration in which Cambodia's embassy in Thailand was burned down," the statement read.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY AFP AND CHEANG SOKHA