

Ambassadors withdrawn as Thaksin row escalates

Written by James O'toole and Vong Sokheng
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Photo by: AFP Thai Ambassador to Cambodia Prasas Prasavinitchai is escorted to Phnom Penh International Airport on Thursday night after being recalled as bilateral relations further soured.

Hun Sen's appointment of the fugitive ex-premier as an adviser results in a diplomatic standoff that both sides insist won't harm relations.

CAMBODIA recalled its ambassador to Thailand Thursday after Bangkok withdrew its top envoy to Phnom Penh as tensions rose over the appointment by Royal decree of Thailand's fugitive ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra as a Cambodian government adviser, a role he later appeared to decline in an online statement.

Deputy Prime Minister Sok An said in a press conference Thursday that the government would consider sending Ambassador You Ay back to Bangkok only after Thailand sent its envoy back to Phnom Penh, adding that the withdrawal of Ambassador Prasas Prasavinitchal came as no surprise.

"Thailand's recall of its ambassador is not a shock for Cambodia because we have seen the Yellow Shirt protesters in front of the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok demanding that their government withdraw its diplomats from Cambodia," Sok An said.

In a separate press conference Thursday, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva voiced his government's indignation over Thaksin's appointment.

"We have recalled the ambassador as the first diplomatic retaliation measure to let the Cambodian government know the dissatisfaction of the Thai people," Abhisit said. "Last night's announcement by the Cambodian government harmed the Thai justice system and really affected Thai public sentiment."

The Cambodian government on Wednesday released a decree dated October 27 and signed by

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King Norodom Sihamoni that named Thaksin an economic adviser to the government and personal adviser to Prime Minister Hun Sen.

In an accompanying statement, the government reiterated its unwillingness to comply with any extradition request, which Bangkok says it would pursue if Thaksin were to travel to Cambodia.

Thaksin was deposed in a 2006 coup and self-exiled last year to avoid prison after being convicted of corruption.

Abhisit added that aid to Cambodia would also be suspended, but that the border is to remain open.

In a post on his online Twitter feed, Thaksin thanked Hun Sen for the appointment but said he preferred Thai politics.

"I thank His Excellency Hun Sen, and I just received a copy which was signed by King Sihamoni. It's an honour. But it's not going to be fun like working to help Thai people out of poverty," Thaksin wrote.

Chheang Vannarith, executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, said he feared that the contentious border-demarkation process being conducted bilaterally through the Joint Border Commission will now be stalled indefinitely. He called on representatives from ASEAN to mediate the disagreement.

"It is time for ASEAN to take a big step forward in conflict resolution," he said. "ASEAN's well-known noninterference principle is being tested, and it possibly could be modified to meet new challenges."

Thailand last recalled its ambassador to Phnom Penh in 2003, when rioters attacked the Thai embassy amid false reports that a Thai actress claimed that Angkor Wat belonged to Thailand.

Sara Colm of Human Rights Watch said that as tensions now escalate, both Thailand and Cambodia must take care to prevent a repeat of 2003.

"It's bad enough that there's already the ongoing border dispute, and we don't want to see the nationalist sentiment further whipped up on either side of this disagreement at the expense of people's lives and security," she said.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY SAM RITH AND AFP