

Thaksin to arrive this week

Written by James O'toole and Vong Sokheng
Monday, 09 November 2009 15:02

Hun Sen says fugitive leader will deliver economics lecture.



Photo by: Khem Sovannara Prime Minister Hun Sen speaks with reporters Sunday at Phnom Penh International Airport after his return from Tokyo, where he attended the inaugural Mekong-Japan summit.

Timeline The Cambodia-Thaksin tangle

October 21, 2009

Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, leader of Thailand's opposition Puea Thai party, makes a one-day visit to Phnom Penh and holds talks with Prime Minister Hun Sen. The following day in Bangkok, he announces that Hun Sen has prepared a house for former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, should he wish to take refuge there.

October 23, 2009

Following his arrival in the Thai resort town of Hua Hin to attend the 15th ASEAN summit, Hun Sen proposes appointing Thaksin as his economics adviser and compares Thaksin's political struggles to those of Myanmar opposition figure Aung San Suu Kyi. Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva says Hun Sen is "misinformed" about the former leader.

November 4, 2009

The Cambodian government releases an October 27 decree signed by King Norodom Sihamoni that names Thaksin economic adviser to the government and personal adviser to Hun Sen, along with a statement reiterating the government's position that it will not extradite Thaksin if he comes to Cambodia. Officials insist the move will not affect bilateral relations.

November 5, 2009

Thailand withdraws its ambassador to Phnom Penh as "retaliation" for Cambodia's official appointment of Thaksin. Cambodia withdraws its ambassador to Bangkok in response, vowing to restore her only after Bangkok does likewise. Bangkok also announces the suspension of aid to Cambodia, though Prime Minister Abhisit maintains that the border will remain open.

Thaksin to arrive this week

Written by James O'toole and Vong Sokheng
Monday, 09 November 2009 15:02

November 8, 2009

Hun Sen announces that Thaksin will visit Cambodia on November 12 to deliver a lecture at the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Thailand had already threatened to close all border checkpoints and further downgrade diplomatic relations, a prospect that became more likely after Hun Sen's announcement. Abhsit, meanwhile, defends his retaliation as protecting "Thai dignity".

THAI ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra is to visit Cambodia this week, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced Sunday, prompting Bangkok to respond that it would seek Thaksin's extradition if the visit takes place and setting the stage for further diplomatic rancour.

Speaking to reporters at Phnom Penh International Airport upon his return from the inaugural Mekong-Japan summit in Tokyo, Hun Sen said Thaksin will deliver a lecture on Thursday to 300 Cambodian economics experts at the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

"Please let Thaksin share my burden of boosting the economy of Cambodia," Hun Sen said in an apparent appeal to the Thai public.

Responding to Hun Sen's remarks, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said his government would pursue Thaksin's extradition if the fugitive billionaire arrives in Phnom Penh this week, according to the Thai News Agency.

Council of Ministers spokesman Phay Siphon said, however, that Cambodia has already made clear that it will not extradite Thaksin because he was prosecuted for "political reasons".

"They should understand that we keep the same position now," Phay Siphon said of the Thai government.

Last week, the Cambodian government released a Royal decree in which Thaksin, who was deposed in a 2006 coup and self-exiled last year to avoid corruption charges, was formally named economics adviser to the government and personal adviser to Hun Sen.

The Thai government reacted by withdrawing its ambassador to Phnom Penh, and Cambodia followed suit.

On Friday, Thailand announced it was scrapping a memorandum of understanding with Cambodia over oil and gas exploration, and threatened to close the border with Cambodia in the event of further antagonism between the two countries.

"If Thais close the border, all trade between Cambodia and Thailand will be cut off," Hun Sen said at the airport, adding: "If you want to close, close it. The loss will be mutual."

Speaking on Sunday prior to Hun Sen's announcement, Abhsit defended his government's actions in the ongoing standoff, telling viewers of his weekly television programme that Cambodia had insulted the Thai justice system.

"All the government has done is for dignity of the country and Thai people," Abhsit said, adding

Thaksin to arrive this week

Written by James O'toole and Vong Sokheng
Monday, 09 November 2009 15:02

that Thailand had acted “calmly and carefully” to deal with the recent escalation of tensions.

Puangthong Rungswasdisab, a political analyst at Thailand's Chulalongkorn University, said bilateral relations are certain to deteriorate further in the likely event that, upon Thaksin's arrival, an extradition request by Thailand is denied by Cambodia.

“The Thai government will have to heed to the pressure of the Thai public to retaliate against the Cambodian government,” she said, speculating that Bangkok will “terminate” completely its diplomatic relationship with Phnom Penh.

Chheang Vannarith, the executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, said diplomatic relations between Thailand and Cambodia are at their worst point since 2003, when rioters attacked the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh. He said Hun Sen and other Cambodian leaders are likely aware of the anger that Thaksin's arrival here will elicit from Abhisit's government, but may be playing the two sides of Thailand's intensely polarised domestic politics against one another.

“The Cambodian government may foresee that the pro-Thaksin group will win the next election in Thailand, so by then all border issues will be solved and friendship will be rebuilt,” he said.

Also on Sunday, Hun Sen said he had ordered the withdrawal of a paratrooper unit stationed around the disputed border area near Preah Vihear temple, emphasising that the recent breakdown in diplomatic relations will not translate into armed hostilities.

“After examining the situation at the border between Cambodia and Thailand, the situation was quiet,” Hun Sen said. “Therefore, I announce the withdrawal of special paratroop number 911 from the area at Preah Vihear temple, and their return to headquarters.”

Yim Phim, commander of Royal Cambodian Armed Forces Brigade 8, stationed near Preah Vihear temple, said Sunday that the border was quiet.

“The situation is normal at the border,” he said. “Thai military officials have always said we should not clash with one another even when there are disputes among our politicians.”

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY AFP AND THET SAMBATH