

Mixed Outlooks Following Cambodian Trip to UN

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Analysts and political observers gave mixed reactions to Cambodia’s address to the UN Security Council on Monday, with some disappointed the international body had not done enough and others saying it gave proper attention to border fighting with Thailand this month.

The foreign ministers of Cambodia and Thailand each appeared before the Security Council in New York on Monday, in an effort to resolve a longstanding border dispute that culminated in violent clashes in early February.

After the session, the Security Council advised maximum restraint, urged both sides to agree to a permanent ceasefire and encouraged the venue of Asean for mediation.

Chheang Vannarith, executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, said the Security Council failed to fully resolve the dispute.

“What Cambodia hoped was that the UN, especially the UN Security Council, would form a working group as international observers, or a peacekeeping force to solve the conflict between both countries by creating a buffer zone,” he told VOA Khmer by phone.

Cambodia also would like to have seen the Security Council request the International Court of Justice to legally address the issue, he said.

The court issued an international decision in 1962 that handed Preah Vihear temple to Cambodia, dismissing Thai claims to the 11th-Century site. Cambodian officials say the decision can also settle a dispute over territory near the temple.

“The UN Security Council can summon a representative from [the court] to testify to the 1962 court verdict,” Chheang Vannarith said. “But I think the UNSC did not do this, which is regretful.”

However, for Chhaya Hang, executive director of the Khmer Institute of Democracy, the Security Council’s position displayed the recognition that the clashes were not serious enough to send in peacekeepers and that the dispute could be solved regionally.

“The UN demand is not too extreme from what we expected,” he said. The Security Council wants to see the dispute solved regionally and created “an important role for Asean,” he told VOA Khmer by phone.

The Security Council also likely views the problem as related to Thai internal politics, which could quiet down soon, and did not want to spend the kind of money it did during the Untac period, he said.

Still other observers said the border situation remains volatile, with thousands of troops still entrenched along the frontier, despite the Security Council’s call for a ceasefire.

Kem Sokha, president of the minority opposition Human Rights Party, said Monday's Security Council session was a success for neither side.

"I say there was no result at all," he said. "Both sides still have a conflict. An no one prevailed over the other."

The Security Council statement displayed "light pressure," he said in a phone interview. "But when there are further problems, then they'll raise to another level."

Cambodia should continue to push for a multi-lateral solution, he said. At the same time, Cambodian authorities should continue to encourage their soldiers "to protect sovereignty."

Yim Sovann, a lawmaker and spokesman for the main opposition Sam Rainsy Party, said the situation was "serious" and required the attention of the UN and Asean.

Thai soldiers had violated Cambodia's territory and broken international law in the recent clashes, he said.

"So any party that violates a Unesco resolution, violates laws or maps and the verdict of the [international court], violates the Paris Peace accords, that party must take responsibility," he said.

Thailand has said it did not enter Cambodian territory in recent fighting.

Yim Sovann too called on the government to ensure troop strength was enough to protect the border. At the same time, he said, Cambodia can capitalize on the international attention to solve outstanding border issues with Vietnam.

Vietnam and Cambodia are planning to end border demarcation measures in 2012, following years of efforts, but critics of recent efforts, especially among the opposition, say Cambodia is ceding land to Vietnam.

For the Thai dispute, Cambodia now says it will seek more mediation from Asean at a regional foreign ministers meeting in Jakarta next week. That will include inviting Asean monitors to any talks over the border with Thailand.

"With a third party, there will be an official record," government spokesman Phay Siphon said, which will help when agreements are reached over the border, such as those that are now awaiting approval by Thai parliament after talks in 2000.

However, skepticism remains over how effective Asean will be in finding a border solution. Critics say the regional forum lacks the muscle to resolve the issues and that it has in the past failed to do so. Instead, Asean leaders generally take a position of non-interference.

Chheang Vannarith said this approach no longer fits the regional context.

"I think Asean should change its character," he said. "I hope that Asean will change its policies."