

Observers just to monitor ceasefire, not to end Cambodia-Thai border row

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by Nguon Sovan

PHNOM PENH, Feb. 23 (Xinhua) -- The support of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to send Indonesian observers to the border disputed areas between Cambodia and Thailand near the 11th century Preah Vihear temple was a "success of foreign diplomatic affairs" for Cambodia, but it will not end the two nations' row, said independent analysts on Wednesday.

"It was the success of foreign diplomatic politics as Cambodia raised the proposal and ASEAN supported it and Thai agreed with it, but it would not resolve the row," said the academic Sok Touch, deputy director general of the Royal Academy of Cambodia's International Relations Institute, on Wednesday.

In the informal ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia, on Feb. 22, the current ASEAN chair welcomed the invitation of Cambodia and Thailand for observers to the respective sides of the affected areas of the border to observe the commitment of both sides to avoid further hostilities.

"The observers are just to watch who starts the fire first in the future and to ensure the ceasefire compliance between the two nations as both sides always put blames on each other for breaking the ceasefire," he said.

Sok Touch said that the resolution for the border conflict could be tackled only if the International Court of Justice explains the verdict in 1962 that awarded the Preah Vihear temple to Cambodia.

"In my analysis, if Thailand dares to go to The Hague for verdict explanation, Thailand will lose disgracefully as Cambodia has enough documents internationally recognized to prove the disputed area belongs to Cambodia, while Thailand has only its unilateral production of map - no international recognition," he said.

"Thailand itself knows that it will lose when going to The Hague, so to avoid face-losing internationally, Thailand will probably choose to resolve the issue bilaterally with the presence of ASEAN chair or ASEAN representative as a mediator," he added.

Chheang Vannarith, the executive director of Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, agreed that only the International Court of Justice could end the dispute between Cambodia and Thailand.

"The decision to send Indonesian observers to the disputed area was a triumph for Cambodia," he said. "I remembered that in 2008, when Singapore was the ASEAN chair, Cambodia asked ASEAN to mediate the conflict, but it just urged the two countries to tackle bilaterally, which has no result so far," he said.

"Now, Cambodia has fulfilled its proposal, it was a big success, but it is just the first step," he said.

"The next step is The Hague for verdict explanation. Cambodia has announced already to appeal to the court for explanation, however, we will wait and see if Thailand dares to suggest the court for explanation or not."

Cambodia and Thailand have had border conflict just a week after Cambodia's Preah Vihear temple was enlisted as World Heritage Site on July 7, 2008.

The conflict is due to Thai claim of the ownership of 1.8 square miles (4.6 sq km) of scrub next to the temple, triggering a military build-up along the border, and periodic clashes between Cambodian and Thai soldiers have resulted in the deaths of troops on both sides.

The latest clashes on Feb. 4-7, unleashed a barrage of artillery shells on both sides of the border, had killed and wounded many soldiers and citizens of both sides, and caused tens of thousands of the two countries' villagers nearby the disputed areas fleeing for safe shelters.

As of Wednesday, the situation at the border disputed areas were calm and the tension was eased, said a brigadier general Thul Sovan, deputy commander of Cambodian Military Division 3, stationed at the frontline near Preah Vihear temple.

"Since Feb. 16, the tension has been eased, but we observed that the number of Thai troops deployed at the border is still the same, no any troop reduction from Thai side," he told Xinhua by phone on Wednesday. "Military confrontation still continues, but it is not as quite tense as before."

ASEAN groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Editor: Fang Yang