

*PREAH VIHEAR*

## Strained relations over ancient ruins wrecking lives

Published: 14/10/2010 at 12:00 AM

Newspaper section: [News](#)

The battles have been waged on international platforms and behind closed cabinet doors, but this is more than just politics - this is playing with people's lives.



Most religious sites invite quiet contemplation, but this border temple of Preah Vihear excites only intemperate passion.

The Thai-Cambodia border dispute over the Preah Vihear temple is over a century long and for many of the locals, conflict is all they have ever known.

Resting atop a cliff over 1,500 feet above sea level, the ancient place of worship presents a stunning view of extraordinary ruins and endless jungle.

However, its natural beauty and spiritual resonance has been stripped in the ensuing violence undertaken in the name of sovereignty.

Its enigmatic beauty is irrelevant. Preah Vihear is a war zone.

Preah Vihear was awarded to Cambodia by the International Court of Justice in 1962, but the clash didn't stop there. When the temple was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2008, the tension between Thailand and its neighbour came to a head - and is arguably now worse than ever.

For many Thais, the Preah Vihear issue is one of security and nationalism. In a recent poll by the National Institute of Development Administration (Nida), nearly 70% of Thai citizens agreed that the government should push Cambodians out of the overlapping area.

But for locals living in the 13 villages across the Thai-Cambodia border, the temple is much more than a symbol of patriotism - it is a constant reminder of economic hardship.

Despite history, "the relationship between Thais and Cambodians used to be like brothers and sisters", said Visit Duangkeaw, a life-long resident of Si Sa Ket province.

"It was very convenient before. We were able to do business on the other side of the border. We could walk freely, that's how easy it was."

When the temple was declared a World Heritage Site, everything changed.

PAD protests against Unesco's decision, border skirmishes and the resulting military presence threw locals for a loop. They expected the temple to become a popular tourist destination, not target practice.

"People used to be able to exchange information with each other, instead of the military standing on either side of the border," said Mr Visit. "Now, I can see the other person, but we can't even contact each other."

In June, access to the temple from Thailand was blocked off completely. The temple is still reachable through a packed laterite road from Siem Reap, passing directly through a Cambodian military base.

For many tourists, Preah Vihear is not worth the travel or the risk.

"I invested a lot of money in my business [when it became a World Heritage Site] and my business has failed," said merchant Chit Pranpop from Pomsarol village in Si Sa Ket.

Ms Chit borrowed money to expand her small restaurant along the Thai gate to Preah Vihear, which has since closed. She is deeply in debt, working at a temporary work agency as a server.

"[My business failed] only because I can no longer contact the other side where people used to buy my stuff," said Ms Chit. "I would like for that old channel to still exist. That was the only way that I could find money for as long as I can remember."

The situation is the same for many locals, who have been forced to leave their villages and seek employment in urban centres.

"I don't have money to feed my children or send them to school," said Pranom Baoton, who left Si Sa Ket province to work in Bangkok. "It used to be convenient to cross the border but I can't do that anymore. That was my business, and now there's no means of income in that area."

The razor wire along the Thai-Cambodian border might as well be laced with bureaucratic red tape. Negative public opinion and the long history of turmoil makes progress slow. For Saing Yon, the damage is done. Last September, the farmer from Oddar Meanchey province in Cambodia found his son in the jungle, shot dead.

"I want to find justice for my child," said Saing. "I want the government to investigate the case and take legal action for my son and other casualties of the conflict. But it's hard to reach those levels.

"I want the Thais to go to Cambodia and the Cambodians to come to Thailand. I want to see committed, strong action legally to understand each other."

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his Cambodian counterpart Hun Sen have met multiple times - most recently at the Asean-US summit in New York - and vowed cooperation to build checkpoints and end the movement of forces at the border.

While their governments are only beginning to work together amicably, the locals of the Thai-Cambodia border have been strongly unified in their request for a long time.

"Whenever I'm over there, this side or that side, military is all I can see," said Pranom. "I want to see Cambodian and Thai leaders turn face-to-face and talk based on the needs of the people, to find an end to the problems so that people don't suffer like they do today."

## About the author



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