Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Thailand and Cambodia sign a new ceasefire agreement

Thailand and Cambodia signed a ceasefire agreement to end weeks of fighting along their border over competing territorial claims.

The agreement took effect at noon (0500 GMT) and calls for a halt in military movements and airspace violation for military purposes.

Only Thailand has carried out airstrikes, hitting sites in Cambodia as recently as Saturday morning, according to the Cambodian Defense Ministry.

The deal also calls for Thailand, after the ceasefire has held for 72 hours, to repatriate 18 Cambodian soldiers it has held as prisoners since earlier fighting in July. Their release has been a major demand of the Cambodian side.

Within hours of the signing, Thailand's Foreign Ministry protested to Cambodia that a Thai soldier sustained a permanent disability when he stepped on an anti-personnel land mine it charged had been laid by Cambodian forces.

Defense ministers met at the border to sign the agreement

The agreement was signed by the countries' defense ministers, Cambodia's Tea Seiha and Thailand's Nattaphon Narkphanit, at a border checkpoint. It followed three-day lower-level talks by military officials.

It declares that the sides are committed to an earlier ceasefire that ended five days of fighting in July and follow-up agreements.

The original July ceasefire was brokered by Malaysia and pushed through by pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump, who threatened to withhold trade privileges unless Thailand and Cambodia agreed.

It was formalized in more detail in October at a regional meeting in Malaysia that Trump attended.

The U.N. chief expressed appreciation to Malaysia, China and the United States for their efforts to peacefully resolve the conflict

Despite those deals, the countries carried on a bitter propaganda war and minor cross-border violence continued, escalating in early December to widespread heavy fighting.

On Saturday, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio welcomed the ceasefire announcement and urged Cambodia and Thailand to fully honor it and the terms of the peace accord reached earlier in Malaysia.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the ceasefire "a positive step towards alleviating the suffering of civilians, ending current hostilities, and creating an environment conducive to achieving lasting peace," his spokesman said..

The U.N. chief expressed appreciation to Malaysia, China and the United States for their efforts to peacefully resolve the conflict, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. "The United Nations stands ready to support efforts aimed at sustaining peace and stability in the region."

Civilians bore the brunt of the fighting

Thailand has lost 26 soldiers and one civilian as a direct result of the combat since Dec. 7, according to officials. Thailand has also reported 44 civilian deaths.

Cambodia hasn't issued an official figure on military casualties, but says that 30 civilians have been killed and 90 injured. Hundreds of thousands of people have been evacuated on both sides of the border.

"Today's ceasefire also paves the way for the displaced people who are living in the border areas to be able to return to their homes, work

in the fields, and even allow their children to be able to return to schools and resume their studies," Cambodia's Defense Minister Tea Seiha told reporters after the signing.

Each side blamed the other for initiating the fighting and claimed to be acting in self-defense.

> The agreement calls on both sides to adhere to international agreements against deploying land mines, a major concern of Thailand

The agreement also calls on both sides to adhere to international agreements against deploying land mines, a major concern of Thailand.

Thai soldiers along the border have been wounded in at least 10 incidents this year by what Thailand says were newly planted Cambodian mines. Cambodia says the mines were left over from decades of civil war that ended in the late 1990s.

Following the latest injury on Saturday, Thailand's Foreign Ministry noted that the new agreement "includes key provisions on joint humanitarian demining operations to ensure the safety of military personnel and civilians in the border areas as soon as possible."

Another clause says the two sides "agree to refrain from disseminating false information or fake news."

The agreement calls for a resumption of previous measures to demarcate the border.

The sides also agreed to cooperate in suppressing transnational crimes. That's primarily a reference to online scams perpetrated by organized crime that have bilked victims around the world of billions of dollars each year. Cambodia is a center for such criminal enterprises.

Malaysia's leader hails the agreement

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who was instrumental in putting together the original ceasefire, said the new agreement "reflects a shared recognition that restraint is required, above all in the interest of civilians."

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said the new agreement reflects a shared recognition that restraint is required, above all in the interest of civilians

Many clauses similar to those in Saturday's agreement were included in October's ceasefire document, and were open to various interpretations and generally honored only in part. These included provisions concerning land mines and the Cambodian prisoners.

The fragility of the new agreement was underlined by Thailand's Defense Ministry spokesperson Surasant Kongsiri in a news briefing after Saturday's signing.

He said that the safe return of civilians to their homes would indicate the situation had stabilized enough to allow the repatriation of the captured Cambodian soldiers.

"However if the ceasefire does not materialize, this would indicate a lack of sincerity on the Cambodian side to create sure peace," he said. "Therefore, the 72- hour ceasefire beginning today is not an act of trust nor unconditional acceptance but a time frame to tangibly prove whether Cambodia can truly cease the use of weapons, provocations and threats in the area."