

Death toll rises in Thai-Cambodian clashes despite ceasefire call

AFP:: Thailand and Cambodia clashed for a third day on Saturday, as the death toll from their bloodiest fighting in years rose to 33 and Phnom Penh called for an “immediate ceasefire”.

A long-running border dispute erupted into intense conflict involving jets, artillery, tanks and ground troops on Thursday, prompting the UN Security Council to hold an emergency meeting on the crisis Friday.

Cambodia’s defence ministry said 13 people were now confirmed killed in the fighting, including eight civilians and five soldiers, with 71 people wounded.

In Thailand, the army said five soldiers were killed on Friday, taking the toll there to 20 – 14 civilians and six military.

The death toll across the two countries is now higher than the 28 killed in the last major round of fighting between 2008 and 2011.

Both sides reported a clash around 5:00 am (2200 Friday GMT), with Cambodia accusing Thai forces of firing “five heavy artillery shells” into locations in Pursat province, which borders Thailand’s Trat province.

The fighting has forced more than 138,000 people to be evacuated from Thailand’s border regions, with more than 35,000 driven from their homes in Cambodia.

After the closed meeting of the Security Council in New York, Cambodia’s UN ambassador Chhea Keo said his country wanted a

ceasefire.

“Cambodia asked for an immediate ceasefire – unconditionally – and we also call for the peaceful solution of the dispute,” he told reporters.

– Border row –

Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman Nikorndej Balankura said Friday, before the UN meeting was held, that Bangkok was open to talks, possibly aided by Malaysia.

“We are ready, if Cambodia would like to settle this matter via diplomatic channels, bilaterally, or even through Malaysia, we are ready to do that. But so far we have not had any response,” Nikorndej told AFP.

Malaysia currently holds the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations regional bloc, of which Thailand and Cambodia are both members.

Acting Thai Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai has warned that if the situation escalates, “it could develop into war.”

Both sides blamed each other for firing first, while Thailand accused Cambodia of targeting civilian infrastructure, including a hospital hit by shells and a petrol station hit by at least one rocket.

Cambodia has accused Thai forces of using cluster munitions.

At the UN, Cambodia’s envoy questioned Thailand’s assertion that his country, which is smaller and less militarily developed than its neighbour, had initiated the conflict.

“(The Security Council) called for both parties to (show) maximum restraint and resort to a diplomatic solution. That is what we are calling for as well,” said Chhea Keo.

The fighting marks a dramatic escalation in a long-running

dispute between the neighbours – both popular destinations for millions of foreign tourists – over their shared 800-kilometre (500-mile) border.

Dozens of kilometres in several areas are contested and fighting broke out between 2008 and 2011, leaving at least 28 people dead and tens of thousands displaced.

A UN court ruling in 2013 settled the matter for over a decade, but the current crisis erupted in May when a Cambodian soldier was killed in a new clash.

AFP