CHAPTER - III

THE MAJOR BORDER CONFLICTS [1984-1988]
MAJOR BORDER CONFLICTS

As discussed in the previous chapter, minor disputes, exchange of fire, mutual recrimination, closure of the border, negotiations and patching up the disputes and reopening of the border, marked the relations between the LPDR and Thailand. It was in this framework of relations that the 1981 border incident generated considerable heat though the dust settled soon. However, the fresh row commenced in 1984 on the issue of the possession of the three border villages assumed serious proportions and both parties sought the intervention of the world body. The conflict dragged on for several years adversely affecting relations between the two countries. It will be interesting to note that unlike the earlier border conflict which was confined to the 1000 Kilometers long river border, the 1984 bout occurred along the land border. As the conflict over "the three villages" was dragging without a solution in sight, yet another war broke out between the cousins at the fag end of the year 1987 lasting for three months. Due to these two major border conflicts the Lao-Thai relations reached to their lowest ebb during 1984-1988.
CONFLICT OVER "THE THREE VILLAGES"

So far as the Lao-Thai relations were concerned the year 1984 started off on a happy note. Delegations of the two countries met in Bangkok in January and agreed to explore means to bolster bilateral ties. They also reaffirmed their desire to turn the Mekong into a river of peace as per the joint communique signed five years ago by the then Thai Premier Kriangsak and the Lao Premier Kaysone. They agreed to expand trading across the border. More important, both parties agreed in principle not to allow regional problems or any third party to vitiate the friendly atmosphere between them. The two sides also agreed that in case a border problem worsened affecting bilateral relations, efforts would be made to solve it at provincial level failing which direct contact at diplomatic and ministerial levels could be made.

It is an irony of fate that within three months warmth yielded to hostility the reason for which being the contest for three obscure border villages - Bane May, Bane Kany and Bane Savang. Together the disputed villages covered an area of 19 square kilometres and were inhabited by 1800 Lao speaking people of 200 families. The LPDR claimed that "the

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1. For a good report on the bilateral talks see Bangkok Post, January 13 and 16, 1984.
three villages" which formed part of Paklay district of Sayaboury province, belonged to Laos since time immemorial. On the other hand, Thailand claimed that the villages in question were part of Khoksung sub-district, Uttaradit province.

The problem came to the fore because of the road-building project in the border area undertaken by Thai Third Army in 1982. Initially Thai military sources described the project as a "strategic military road", later, addressing a press conference, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila himself declared it a "project to extend communications to remote villages" near the border, "as part of our overall national rural development programme". As the last 25 kilometres stretch of road passing through the three disputed villages was in progress, Laos felt threatened. In March 1984 Laotian troops obstructed the road construction. On April 15, 1984, Laotian forces, rushed to the border

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5. For full text of Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila's address at the foreign correspondents Club of Thailand on June 27, 1984, see Bangkok Post, June 28, 1984.
earlier, clashed with Thai border police and rangers and subsequently garrisoned and placed the three villages under the control of Capt. Chantra, a Pathet Lao army officer. The result was, work on the last phase of the road construction was halted.

Initially, it appeared that both the governments would be able to solve the problem amicably through the existing mechanism — talks at the provincial level — as per the Lao-Thai joint communiqué of January 1979. Indeed, both sides played the dispute down. While the Thai deputy foreign minister Prapass Limpahbandu termed the conflict as a "minor problem", Laos saw it as a normal misunderstanding which would be sorted out by local officials.  

However, bellicose Thai military officials viewed the stationing of Lao troops in the three villages a serious affair. Reacting against the action of Laos, the Thai Army served a protest note urging the Laotian government to withdraw its troops from the three villages, which, according to it, were well within Thai territory. Thai army also issued orders that the road be completed at any cost by the 


turn of the year. It was also made clear that, if the situation warranted, Thai troops would be rushed to protect the workers. Serious incidents on May 25, 1984, in which a good number of Thais were wounded, came in handy for the Thai military officials who began to give wide publicity to the border row. Threatening statements were also made. Supreme Commander of the Thai Army, General Arthit Kamlangek, in a statement issued on May 31, 1984, said: "we will try to avoid clashes, but we will ensure that the construction work continues".

Despite Thai Army provocations, governments of Laos and Thailand continued to pin their hopes on a peaceful settlement. As Dommen has pointed out, during the discussions in Vientiane on June 5, 1984, between the Thai Ambassador to Laos, Sompong Faichampa, and the Lao deputy Foreign Minister, Souban Salitthilat, "there was every evidence of cooperation on both sides, manifested by their expressed willingness to let the local authorities handle the matter". But, the problem assumed a new dimension very next day.

On June 6, 1984, 1500 Thai troops entered the disputed villages and seized them after evicting the Laotian troops.\(^{11}\) Thus, it was clearly perceived that the military under the leadership of Gen. Arthit was taking precedence of the Bangkok government. This was further proved by the fact that in 1984 Gen. Arthit was riding on the crest of his popularity. People belonging to different sections of the Thai society turned to him for help. Pointing out Gen. Arthit's high tide of popularity a Thai scholar noted:

General Arthit was highly visible throughout the year and his popularity soared as the public began to perceive him as the 'knight on a white house'. The people saw him as an active and authoritative leader who had a genuine concern for the nation's welfare and a sincere interest in solving its problems, whether they were military, political, economic or social. As he was visibly involved in attending to matters of concern, it soon began to appear as if General Arthit was a surrogate Prime Minister.\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\) For the Laotian version of the origin of the conflict see "Commentary" by Pasason June 16, 1984 in FBIS 'Southeast Asia Report', August 9, 1984, pp.42-44. Also see, "The Thai Stand Firm", Asia Week, June 29, 1984, pp.15-16.

General Arthit was also internationally recognised as a powerful political and military figure in Thailand. His visit to China in mid-May 1984, a few weeks before Thai occupation of the villages, was given wide publicity by the government-controlled Chinese mass media. He was received by Chinese top brass.13 Not unnaturally Laos linked General Arthit's trip to China with the seizure of the three villages by the Thai military. Laotian leadership saw him as "the instigator of the occupation of the 3 Lao villages".14 Lending credence further to the Laotian view was the fact that when the Laotian delegation wanted to call on the Prime Minister and the king of Thailand to hand over the messages from the Prime Minister and the President of the LPDR, Thai Foreign Ministry turned down the request saying that it should first meet and convince General Arthit.15

PEACE INITIATIVES

Following the military occupation of the three hamlets, which heightened tension between Thailand and Laos, Thai


14. Lao People's Democratic Republic, Memorandum on the attack and occupation of three Lao villages Bane May, Bane Kang and Bane Savang by the troops of Ultra-rightist reactionaries among the Thai ruling circles, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vientiane, August 17, 1984, p.10.

15. Ibid, p.13 & see also Bangkok Post, August 8 & 28, 1984.
government under Premier Prem Tinsulanonda sought to find a negotiated settlement of the border row. Result was, two rounds of talks were held in Bangkok by the delegations of the two governments—the first on July 21-23, 1984, and the second on August 6-15, 1984. While agreeing to withdraw its troops from the three villages, Thailand expected Laos to agree to the following:

1. Pulling out Laotian troops stationed at Sayaboury;
2. Putting an end to the military confrontation and recrimination attacks through the mass media;
3. Reaffirming the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1904 which determined the watershed line as the border line;
4. Cooperating closely with Thailand facilitating the work and ensuring the security of the Joint Technical Committee in the disputed area;
5. Abiding by the report of the Joint Technical Committee;
6. Offering facilities by both for the safe return of the villagers to their homes on a voluntary basis;
7. Offering assistance by both to the people in the three villages, who were victimised as a result of the conflict.16

Laotian side rejected, what Sawanit Kongsiri and Chavat Attayukti, co-spokesmen of the Thai Foreign Ministry, described as the "reasonable proposals" by the Thai side.\textsuperscript{17}

By proposing the withdrawal of forces of both sides facilitating the creation of a 'free zone' in the disputed area, Thailand made it clear that it was not prepared to relinquish its territorial rights in the area. By suggesting the setting up of a Joint Technical Committee Thai government hoped that the whole issue could be examined afresh and settled, not at the negotiating table but at the disputed area, where Thailand was in a commanding position thanks to the Thai military occupation of the villages. Bangkok was also careful not to give scope to Vientiane to brand Thailand an aggressor. It was for this reason Bangkok insisted on both the countries extending assistance to the victims of the conflict; and promised to send back to the three villages only those who opted for it.

CONFLICTING CLAIMS

Laos claimed the disputed villages on the basis of history and the administrative system, geographical maps and boundary maps.

\textsuperscript{17} Bangkok Post August 17, 1984.
According to Vientiane, one hundred years ago the disputed villages were located in the area which is now called Bane May. About eighty years ago, in view of the growing population, some of the inhabitants of Bane May moved out and developed a new village called Bane Kang. In 1945, a new village called Bane Savang was created by some of the inhabitants belonging both to Bane May and Bane Kang. These three villages formed part of Bane May Canton, Paklai District, Sayaboury Province, under the LPDR regime. Being basically Lao people, speaking and writing Lao language and following Lao customs, the people of "the three villages" paid taxes to the government of Laos during and after the colonial period.  

Thailand, whose interest in the area was of recent origin, that too because of the Communist Party of Thailand's guerrillas who made it a base for their activities against the government in Bangkok, did not have historical and


administrative claims comparable to those of Laos. Yet Thailand dismissed the Laotian “history” of the three villages as nothing but “folktales.”

Thailand also had gone to the extent of reminding the Laotian leadership that all territory which included most of the LPDR was under Siamese suzerainty before the advent of the French. In a radio broadcast on June 26, 1984, Thai army said:

What would happen if Thailand demands from Laos the restitution of the 62,500 sq.km. territory which France has forced us to yield in the past? What would happen if Thailand, disregarding the fact to whom the 3 villages belong would raise the question or the territory located beyond these villages up to the Mekong which in the past belonged altogether to it.

By this poser Thailand was certainly not claiming its suzerainty over 62,500 sq.km of territory which it gave up in the past but, as Dommen has pointed out, “the Thai were in effect warning the LPDR not only not to press its claim to a tiny piece of Uttaradit province, but also and for more importantly, not to try to claim on this basis the


territories on the right bank of the Mekong" which were under Siamese suzerainty in the 19th century.22

GEOGRAPHICAL MAPS

Laos staked its claims on the disputed villages on the basis of another piece of evidence, namely, map prepared by the Franco-Siamese Border Demarcation Committee in 1905-1907. This map showed Bane May village on the side of Laos. The other two villages in question were, however, not shown because they were founded at a later date.23 Besides, Laos also cited a border treaty between France and Siam signed in 1908. In support of the legal validity of these border agreements, Laos mentioned the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the Buddhist shrine of Preah Vihear in 1962 when the International Court of Justice based its ruling on the Franco-Siamese border agreement and the judgement of the World Court was accepted by Thailand.24

22. Dommen, n.10, pp.116-117.


In countering this claim of Laos, Thai government was not as weak as it was in respect of historical evidence. Thai side argued that it would go by a large scale map printed by the Thai government in 1978 which had clearly shown the disputed villages within the Uttaradit province of Thailand. In a statement issued on August 15, 1984 Thai Foreign Ministry claimed that its map was more authentic as it was prepared "using modern and accurate technique of aerial photography". The statement also pointed out that the 1907 map is much smaller in scale and therefore reveals less detail and is less accurate.  

Laos argued that the Thai map, was based on a map of the US Armed Forces which specifically warned that "delineation of international boundaries must not be considered authoritative" and therefore had "no legal value". Thailand countered saying that Laotian maps had been prepared by the French without the consent of the Thai government. But Laos contended that the French drawn maps were printed by the Thai Army. From the start Thailand was aware that it was on slippery ground and its claims to the villages were not very sound. Yet Bangkok government held

25. For Text of the statement issued by the Foreign Ministry of Thailand see Bangkok Post August 16, 1984.


its ground because it did not wish to let down the Thai military which adopted an uncompromising stand on the border issue. Further, the provocative actions of the Lao officials exasperated Thailand. Also, Bangkok was concerned about the national prestige. FEER's 'Intelligence' has put the whole problem in its right perspective:

Thai Foreign Ministry officials say that the recent border clash between Thai and Lao troops at Uttaradit resulted from the Thai army relying on inaccurate survey maps prepared by the United States Army in 1978 which erroneously locate Lao villages on the Thai side of the frontier. According to these sources, the Foreign Ministry urged caution, but the army proceeded to fortify the three contested villages on the conviction that they were within Thai territory - an act taken as a provocation by Lao authorities. Although the Thai army has now accepted that the US maps may be in error, officials say considerable "face" is involved and the army is resisting suggestions that it should quietly withdraw from the contested positions. 28

28. FEER, October 4, 1984, p.11.
BOUNDARY MARKS

In support of its claim, Laos cited the watershed principle which formed the basis for the Franco-Siamese Border Treaty of 1907. According to the Treaty, the watershed line would form the border. Areas where waters flowed east towards the Mekong Basin formed part of Lao territory and the areas where the water flowed west towards the Chao Phraya river belonged to Thailand. Accordingly, three boundary markers were created by the French and Siamese authorities delimiting the Lao-Thai border in the area of the three villages. In 1931 the old boundary markers were replaced by the new ones. These markers were inscribed in Thai and French on each side.

Thailand too accepted the watershed principle but asserted that it was not clear where the watershed line was actually situated in the disputed area. Laos alleged that Thai troops had gone a step further and removed the two boundary marks to their advantage. Lao Foreign Ministry cited Channel 7 of Thai TV Broadcasting showing on June 7, 1984 the shifting of boundary marks by the Thai soldiers.

29. For an excellent discussion on the watershed principle see Dommen, n.12, p.116. Also see LPDR, Memorandum, n.14, p.4, Keesings volume XXXI, June 1985, p.33662, Bangkok Post August 16, 1984.
30. LPDR, Memorandum, n.14, p.5. See also Pasason, n.18.
Nonetheless, Bangkok proposed that a joint technical committee consisting of officials of both countries could visit the disputed area to pinpoint the location of the disputed villages applying watershed principle.³¹

Laos rejected the proposal flatly. Argument was, there was no need to visit the disputed area because "the three villages" were well within the Laotian territory. Laotian deputy Foreign Minister Soubanh Srithirath, who headed the Laotian delegation for the first round of talks, which ended in a deadlock, told a press conference on July 24, 1984 thus:

I want to confirm that the three villages belong to Laos. They are located within the water boundary in the Laotian territory in accordance with the historical demarcation line and situated in the agreed watershed line territorial partition.³²

The Memorandum released by the Foreign Ministry of Laos on August 17, 1984 was still more caustic:

The border line in that area [around the three villages] has been delineated and demarcated many

decades ago. In raising the question of setting up a "technical team" and to conduct an on the spot survey in the vicinity of the 3 villages, it is clear that they [Thai officials] reject the historical border line with the hope of reconsidering it. If this proposal has been accepted, it would have constituted on the one hand a precedent for a future general revision of the entire border and on the other an ipso-facto refusal to acknowledge the Lao sovereignty over the 3 villages which will then become a disputed area.\textsuperscript{33}

PULL OUT OF THE TROOPS

Ever since the Thai troops occupied the three villages on June 6, 1984, Laos has been demanding the "unconditional withdrawal" of Thai troops from the occupied territory. In fact, Vientiane made it the precondition for its participation in the negotiations, though it was dropped later demonstrating its flexible approach to solve the border problem peacefully.\textsuperscript{34} Responding positively, Bangkok agreed to withdraw its troops, but not before securing an assurance from Laos that Vientiane would not send in its

\textsuperscript{33} LPDR, Memorandum n.14, p.11.
\textsuperscript{34} Bangkok Post July 21, 1984.
troops. In other words, Thailand wanted the establishment of a 'free zone' in the disputed area facilitating the successful completion of the mission of investigating the geographical location of the three villages by the proposed Joint Technical Committee. This was not acceptable to Laos. Vientiane apprehended that acceptance of this proposal would amount to recognising Thai sovereignty and surrendering its sovereign rights over the three villages.\textsuperscript{35} Disapproving Thai move Laotian Foreign Ministry said:

The Thai proposal as to "the withdrawal of Thai troops and non-sending of the Lao troops into the 3 villages" is aimed at turning the 3 Lao villages into a demilitarised and disputed zone, practically a drag on their occupation of the 3 Lao villages. They put on equal footing the aggressor and the aggrieved.\textsuperscript{36}

Despite opposition from Laos, Thailand went ahead with its move and sent a survey team to the disputed area. However, a Thai official claimed, the survey team could not accomplish its mission because of constant Lao harassment.\textsuperscript{37}

It could also be argued that the Bangkok government did not

\textsuperscript{35} Bangkok Post August 15, 1984.

\textsuperscript{36} LPDR, Memorandum n.14, p.10.

\textsuperscript{37} Keesings Volume XXXI, June 1985, p.33662.
announce the results of the survey because they were favourable to Laos.

REHABILITATION AND COMPENSATION TO THE AFFECTED VILLAGERS

Sending back those inhabitants of the three villages, who entered Thai territory on their own for safety or under coercion, and payment of "compensation for the loss of life and property" of the people of the three hamlets due to Thai aggression had been two other major demands of Laos. Laos maintained that since the "Thai side has forced the population of the three villages to go to Thailand" following the occupation of the villages in question, it was the responsibility of Bangkok to "release" and "return them all to their home villages". Thailand, on the other hand, argued that as the villagers had gone to Thailand at their free will Bangkok was not prepared to force them back but was agreeable to send back only those who opted for voluntary repatriation. In support of this argument, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila cited the 30 families who had voluntarily returned by the close of 1984.

With regard to payment of compensation to the victims, Siddhi categorically stated that Thailand had no obligation

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38. LPDR, Memorandum, n.14, p.12.
to pay compensation. Nonetheless, Thailand finally agreed to share with Laos the responsibility of rehabilitation of the sufferers. But this was not acceptable to Laos. Taking a firm stand, the Lao Foreign Ministry said:

The Thai have committed crimes, caused losses in lives and properties to the people of the three villages. They must pay appropriate compensation, the Thai side has no right to set any condition whatsoever. Furthermore, they have no right to demand the Lao side to share the responsibility of the Thai side for the crimes they have committed.

INTERNATIONALISATION OF THE BORDER BOUT

Following the failure of two rounds of peace talks, both Thailand and Laos vied with each other for securing international support for their respective stands. Thailand, which initially wanted to localise the smouldering border conflict allowing no scope for Vietnam, strategic ally of Laos, to fish in the troubled water to its own advantage, thought it good to internationalise the conflict. By doing

42. LPDR, Memorandum n.14, p.12.
so, as Siam Rat, a Thai daily, pointed out, Bangkok hoped to impress upon the world community that it desired to have friendly ties with Laos and solve the problem using political and diplomatic means rather than taking recourse to force. Further, it would help Thailand to present to the international community its version of the conflict. 43

Another Thai daily, Matichon said that taking the issue to "world stage" would benefit Thailand in three ways: First, Laos and Vietnam could be prevented from beating Thailand "in the race to spread propaganda on the international front", second, Thailand would gain international "sympathy". 44 and more important and immediate concern was, Thailand could prevent the issue from undermining its chances of wresting the non-permanent seat of the United Nations Security Council for which elections were due in October 1984. The need of the hour, therefore, was to neutralise the effect of the propaganda of Vietnam and Laos damaging Thai reputation in the eyes of the people of the world. Thai daily, Ban Muang cautioned: "Vietnam's propaganda was much more efficient than ours" 45.

For its part, Laos, ably supported by Vietnam, geared its propaganda machinery to gain international sympathy and support which in turn, it was hoped, would pressure Bangkok to yield to Vientiane and withdraw its troops from the three villages. Thailand's ankling for the United Nations Security Council seat came in handy for Laos.

BRIEFINGS TO ENVOYS

Thailand launched diplomatic offensive to justify its claims to the three villages. Retaliating the continuous and consistent Vietnamese and Laotian verbal attacks over the dispute, the Thai Foreign Ministry invited envoys for a briefing on the morning of June 22, 1984 on the ongoing conflict with Laos. Diplomats were classified into four groups - ASEAN, ASEAN'S Dialogue partners, the non-aligned movement and Soviet bloc states and separate sessions were held for each group. Diplomats from fortyone countries in all attended the briefings. While Suthi Prasartvinichai, chief of political department of the foreign ministry, chaired the first three briefings for envoys from ASEAN countries, ASEAN Dialogue partners and the non-aligned group, his deputy Chawat Attayukti chaired the last briefing for diplomats of the socialist-bloc, minus the diplomat of the Soviet Union which turned down the invitation. The invitees were given a graphic account of the border row.
Besides showing documents, maps in support Thailand's title to the disputed villages were distributed among the envoys. Again on August 16, 1984, the very next day after the second round of peace talks ended in a fiasco, Thai Foreign Ministry summoned a meeting with diplomats from thirteen friendly countries for a briefing.

Laos too was involved in a similar exercise. On August 15, 1984, the day on which the second round of talks ended in a deadlock, Laotian Ambassador in Bangkok, Kamphan Simmalavong, separately called on US Ambassador John Gunter Deon and the Japanese envoy Masatada Tachibana to convince them of the justness of the cause his country was fighting for. Lao delegation stayed on in Bangkok two weeks more after the second round of peace talks brokedown and according to Voice of Free Asia, "made contacts with foreign diplomats in Thailand". Reflecting the ruffled feelings of the Bangkok government Voice of Free Asia said: "A clear


proof, that the Lao side is not sincere in settling the problem of the three villages but in making propaganda campaigns out of the development of the situation, was the continued stay in Thailand by the Lao delegation after the suspension of the talks." Further, intensifying its political and diplomatic efforts to draw world attention to the border conflict, Laos invited officials of 18 foreign embassies in Vietiane on October 7, 1984 to inspect the area near the three villages.

PRESS BRIEFINGS

A few days after Thai forces occupied the three villages, Laos called in Vientiane a press meet where Thailand was presented as an "aggressor". On August 16, 1984, Leader of the Lao delegation to second round of talks and deputy Foreign Minister Soubanh Srithirath gave two interviews, one to Agence France Presse correspondent and another to the correspondent of Associated Press accusing Thailand of illegally occupying the Lao territory. As part of the publicity campaign Laotian Ambassadors in Moscow, 

50. Ibid.
Hanoi and New Delhi were instructed by Vientiane to hold press meets. One such exercise was undertaken by the Laotian envoy in Hanoi. He gave a briefing to press reporters from Soviet bloc countries.

In the third week of October 1984, Lao Ambassador in Thailand called a press conference in Bangkok at his embassy to circulate the communique issued by the Laotian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on October 14, 1984, twelve days after Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila declared that Thai troops would be withdrawn from the disputed area soon - detailing Laos's stand on the disputed border villages. Thailand viewed this "unconventional style of diplomacy" as an interference in the internal affairs of the host country and would defame the host country. Reflecting the Thai disenchantment, Voice of Free Asia failed the press conference of Lao envoy saying it "comes as a great surprise to us that a country which is so close to us geographically as well as in terms of blood ties should have behaved, through the deeds of its dignitaries stationed

54. Viraphol, n.25, p.1270.
55. Dommen, n.12, p.117.
here, in the manner that must be considered a taboo in the general diplomatic practice".57

Countering Laos' moves, Thai Foreign Ministry invited in August 1984 wire service chiefs for a briefing on the Thai position on the border dispute.58 Earlier, on June 27, 1984, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savatsila addressed the reporters at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand. While dubbing the border incident as an "unfortunate" development, Siddhi expressed hope that "differences between our two countries can be resolved peacefully through quick diplomacy, cool rationality and mutual respect". Emphasising that Thailand did not covet any part of Lao territory, he declared that Thailand was committed to improve Thai-Lao relations.59

PROTECT RALLIES AND MEETINGS

As a part of its strategy to bring Thailand to its knees by damaging its reputation anti-Thai rallies were organised not only in Laos but also in other countries of Soviet bloc. Reacting spontaneously, the people of Vientiane

57. Ibid


59. For full text of Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila's address at the foreign correspondent club of Thailand on June 29, 1984, see Ibid, June 28, 1984.
municipality joined by some mass organisations, including the Lao Women's Union, the Lao people revolutionary youth union and the federation of Lao trade unions, and state employees, held grand rallies on June 6 and 7, 1984 hailing border defence forces and public security forces. On June 14, 1984 a mass rally was organised by Vientiane residents including "Buddhist monks, cadres, spadiers, policemen, students and people" denouncing Thai "attack and encroachment on Lao territory". Similar rallies were held in other parts of Laos on June 16, 17 and 27 and July 3, 1984.

Protest meetings and rallies were held in countries friendly to Laos. On June 25, 1984, the Vietnam-Laos Friendship Association, the Peace Committee and the Committee for Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity, jointly organised a meeting in Hanoi supporting the Lao people's "just demand that Thai troops withdraw from Villages immediately". Law students in East Germany and the Soviet Union organised rallies espousing the cause of their country

61. Ibid.
and condemning Thai military adventure in the disputed area in the Lao-Thai border. The students of the three Indochinese countries studying in the Mongolian People's Republic jointly held a rally in Ulan-Bator in September 1984 in support of the struggle of the local Lao people of the three Lao borderline hamlets against the "illegal occupation" by Thai troops.

DEBATE IN REGIONAL FORUMS

Lao-Thai border skirmish was discussed at the 9th conference of Indochinese Foreign Ministers held in Vientiane on July 2, 1984. It is interesting to note that though originally venue of the conference was Ho Chi Minh city, it was subsequently shifted to Vientiane at the request of Laos so as to invite world attention to the Lao-Thai border problem. While "wholly supporting" the position of Laos and expressing its "serious concern" over the Lao-Thai border conflict, the conference resolutely demanded the "ultra-rightist reactionaries among the Thai authorities put an end to their violations of Laos' sovereignty and territorial integrity". Also, the conference

64. Dommen, n. 12, p.117.


condemned China for creating tense situation not only at the Lao-Thai border, but also at the Sino-Vietnamese, Sino-Lao, and Thai-Kampuchea borders. Immediately after the conclusion of the Conference, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach made a scathing attack on Thailand. Thach told Vietnam News Agency and Vietnam Television in Hanoi on July 4, 1984 that Thailand's agreement to solve its problems with Laos was only a cover up for its use of force to occupy more and more Lao territory.

For its part, Thailand raised its dispute with Laos at the 17th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Jakarta, July 9-10, 1984. Curiously, the target of Thai attack was not Laos but Vietnam. In his opening statement on July 9, 1984, the Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila, while assailing Vietnam for trying to enlarge what was "purely a technical problem of verifying the precise border between the two countries into a political problem with serious implications", warned Hanoi: "My country will not allow any third country to distract us from our desire to maintain good relations with


68. Vietnam courier No. 8, 1984, p.11.
The only other ASEAN country which referred to the Lao-Thai conflict, either in the opening speeches or in the closing speeches of the Meeting was Malaysia. In his opening statement on July 9, 1984, Malaysian Foreign Minister Tan Sri Muhammad Ghazali Shafie said:

Malaysia is concerned over the border problem which has developed between Laos and Thailand. We welcome the readiness and sincerity of Thailand to work for peaceful resolution of the issue through negotiations. Malaysia hopes that this problem will be expeditiously resolved and would like to call on all outside powers to desist from interfering in what is strictly a bilateral issue between Laos and Thailand.

However, in a joint communique issued at the end of their meeting on July 10, 1984, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, while welcoming "Thailand's policy of resolving differences with Laos amicably in the spirit of good neighbourliness" urged upon Hanoi to desist from interfering in the relations between Thailand and Laos which are based on reciprocity and

69. For the text of Siddhi's speech see Statements by ASEAN Foreign Ministers at ASEAN Ministerial Meetings, 1967-1987, ASEAN Secretariate, Jakarta, 1987, p.475.
70. Ibid. p.465.
recognised international principles".71 By doing so, ASEAN, though an "economic club" preferring "to shut out politics, controversies and disputes, in order to focus on 'consensus and co-operation' on issues relating to trade and commerce".72 and majority of its members did not evince appreciable interest in the row between the cousins, had gone some length not to displease Thailand.73

BRIEFING TO NON-ALIGNED COUNTRIES

Laos raised the border issue at the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-aligned countries held in New York in the first week of October 1984. Since India was the Chairman of the Nonaligned Movement [NAM], Laos thought it expedient to brief New Delhi in advance about the Lao-Thai conflict. Lao Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Soubh Srithirath, met the Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, Ramesh Bhandari, in New Delhi and appraised him of the tense situation along the Lao-Thai border.

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Explaining the "serious situation" created by the Thai occupation of three villages, Soubanh Srithirath told the NAM Meeting on October 11, 1984 that "the aggression on the three Lao villages" which "is a part of expansionist ambition of the ultra-rightist Thai reactionaries against the Lao territory" was "the result of the Thai-Chinese collusion against the three countries of Indochina". He, therefore, sought "moral sympathy and solidarity of the nonaligned countries in recovering the Lao sovereignty over the three villages". Since the Thai action represented a "marked aggression" and "a clear territorial occupation", he urged the international community and the NAM to "take appropriate action which is imperative in solving the problem peacefully and in accordance with the legitimate demands of the Lao people". However, it was not difficult perceive that the real motive of Laos in taking the issue to NAM was to block Thailand's entry into the UNSC. Appealing to the Non-aligned countries not to elect Thailand as the non-permanent member of the UNSC, Soubanh said:

For us it is clear that the eventual election of this country as a non-permanent member of the Security Council would be tantamount to negation even of aims and principles of the UN Charter, most particularly of the role and the noble mission the charter, through its Chapter VII
[article 39 and others] confers on this prestigious and August Assembly.  

Laos perhaps expected that the Non-aligned meet would extend support to Vientiane and condemn Thailand for its seizure of the three villages. But nothing of that sort had happened since the NAM countries were more worried of the forces working to weaken the unity of the movement and the super power rivalry threatening world peace.  

BORDER PROBLEM AND THE UN

The process of internationalisation of the Lao-Thai border bout reached high water mark when the villages issue was taken to the United Nations. In Thai perspective "the timing of the move" to involve UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council in the affair was "more than a coincidence".  

74. For text of statement by the Lao Vice-Foreign Minister Soubanh Srithirath at the Ministerial Meeting of the nonaligned countries held in New York on October 1, 1984, see LPDR, The question of the Thai Aggression on June 6, 1984 Against Lao Territory before the Security council of the United Nations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vientiane, 9 October 1984, pp.19-23.  

75. For an account of the NAM Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in New York in October 1984, see V.D. Chopra [ed], NAM Summit : New Delhi to Harare [New Delhi, 1986] pp.165-66.  

permanent seat of the UN Security Council which was being vacated by Pakistan. Communist Mongolia's bid for the same seat made Bangkok nervous. Yet Thailand did not sit on her hands in the world waiting to become a member of the UN Security Council. It had a lot of friends and could take appropriate action to woo the member nations of the UN. A Thai leading daily claimed that "Thailand has an excellent chance of winning" the UN Security Council seat since Bangkok "has amassed considerable support".77 Thailand's close relations with the US was no doubt a plus point, but, as a Thai scholar had pointed out, it was also a minus point in the sense that Thailand found it hard to project itself as a "neutral, nonaligned third world country".78 On the other hand, Mongolia, as pointed out by Bangkok Post was "strongly backed" by the Soviet Union and its satellites79 and "probably some of the countries calling themselves neutral in UN General Assembly".80 Thailand attached much importance to the UN Security Council seat because UN Security Council had to vote some time later on the question of Kampuchea's representation at the UN. It was everybody's

77. Ibid.
79. Editorial, n.76.
knowledge that Thailand backed the Kampuchean government in
exile - the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea -
which held the UN seat defeating the claims of the pro-
vietnam Phnom Penh Government - People's Republic of
Kampuchea - headed by Heng Samrin. Bangkok, therefore,
considered getting the UN Security Council seat "a most
strategic affair". Bangkok Post put the entire problem in
its right prospective when it said editorially:

The matter becomes really crucial should the
Vietnamese or the leader of the Communist bloc,
the Soviet Union or for that matter, any other
country brings up the matter of Kampuchea for
consideration by the Security Council. It is
comforting to know that the United States, like
the Soviets and the Chinese and other permanent
members, has the right to Veto. But any defeat in
voting could have unpleasant connotations in the
view of the people of the world. 82

Two weeks after Thai forces occupied the disputed
hamlets, the permanent representatives of Laos and Thailand
to the UN met UN Secretary General separately and presented

81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
their own versions of the border problem. Again Laos submitted a memorandum to the UN Chief charging the Thai armed forces not only with occupying three Lao border villages but also with firing more than 800 rounds of artillery on August 25, 1984. For its part, Thailand submitted a protest note to the UN Secretary General over the attacks on August 26, 1984 by the Laotian forces killing a Thai soldier and wounding nine others. The protest note read: "The Thai Government deplores such acts of provocation by the Laos side which not only create further tensions in the area of the said three villages but also confirm Laos' insincerity and unwillingness to settle the dispute peacefully and urgently." Earlier Vietnam circulated a protest note among the UN members accusing Thailand of occupying the three hamlets.

The UN General Assembly served as a convenient forum for Laos to portray Thailand as an aggressor and for Thailand to defend its actions. This was particularly so given the fact that the members of the UN General Assembly

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86. Voice of Free Asia, Bangkok, October 9, 1984, in FBIS, Southeast Asia Report, November 1, 1984, p.47.
had to elect a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in October 1984 and for which as pointed earlier, Thailand was a serious contender. In fact, even before the issue was raised in the UN General Assembly, Laos presented to the world community a graphic account of what it called "Siam's hegemonist and expansionist policy against Laos" by bringing out in September 1984 a 'White Book' entitled The Truth about Thai-Lao Relations.87

Addressing the UN General Assembly on October 2, 1984, the Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila down played the border incidents saying that his government considered them as "minor border incidents which can unfortunately occur in any part of the world". He added that the issue itself concerned "only three small remote villages covering an area of 19 square kilometres and a population of 1100 people". Nevertheless, he declared wedded to the policy of maintaining "good neighbourly relations with Laos", Royal Thai Government had decided to remove Thai military presence from the three villages.88


88. For Text of Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila's address to the UN General Assembly on October 2, 1984 see Bangkok Post, October 4, 1984.
In his statement \(^\text{89}\) made in the UN General Assembly, shortly after that made by the Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila, Vice-Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the LPDR, Phoune Sipaseuth, described the Thai occupation of the three villages as "the most serious event that has occurred in Lao-Thai relations since the formation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic". Denying that it was a simple border incident, Phoune thundered:

This was not simply a border incident and it was certainly not simply a border dispute, which is something that can happen quite often between two neighbouring countries. Rather it was an act of premeditated aggression violating Lao sovereignty and territorial integrity, it was a serious violation of the two joint Lao-Thai declarations, it was a provocation to confrontation in the region, and it was a violation of the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.

While appealing to all the delegations participating in that session of the UN General Assembly "to urge the Thai
side to respect the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Laos by withdrawing its troops from "the three villages", Phoune cautioned whether a country which had committed aggression against Laos was "a suitable nominee for non-permanent membership of the Security Council".

A week after the forceful presentation of their respective positions on the border dispute in the UN General Assembly, Laos and Thailand got ready for yet another bout. This time the forum they had chosen was Security Council, the highest council of the world body, for becoming a member of which Thailand was working vigorously. While Thailand remained sceptical, Laos mounted its attack on Bangkok with doubled vigour. In doing so, Laos was perhaps encouraged and enthused by the fact that the Chairman of the UN Security Council was Basile Guisson, Foreign Minister of a socialist country, Burkina Faso [formerly Upper Volta], with, as was to be expected, "warm relations" with the Soviet Union and other Communist countries including Cuba and North Korea. 90

Addressing the UN Security Council on October 9, 1984 91

Phoune Sipaseuth, Foreign Minister of the LPDR, severely


91. For Text of the statement by Phoune Sipaseuth, Foreign Minister of the LPDR before the UN Security Council on October 9, 1984, see LPDR, The Question... United Nations, n.89, pp.27-36.
condemned the Thai occupation of the three villages which, he reiterated, was "a clear cut case of premeditated aggression". While holding Thailand responsible for the break down of two rounds of peace talks, Phoune dismissed Thai claim that Vietnam was vitiating peaceful atmosphere between Laos and Thailand. On the other hand Phoune hailed Laos' Vietnam connection as "brotherly friendship and close alliance". He warned the members of the UN Security Council not to be swayed by the Thai Foreign Minister's announcement in the UN General Assembly a week before that the "Thai Government has decided to remove the Thai military presence from the three villages".

Withdrawal of Thai troops from the disputed villages was one of the major demands of Laos. Yet the statement on the Thai troop pull out did not seem to have brought cheers to Laos. What were the reasons? First, though Thailand decided to withdraw its troops, Bangkok, as pointed out by Phoune, did not give "precise hour, date, month or year for the total withdrawal". Second, Vientiane was apprehensive that even if Thailand withdrew its forces, Thai administration, police force, para-military forces and administrative personnel would stay put. Third, in his statement, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi was silent on the other two demands of Laos--sending back the villagers who

92. Ibid, p.34.
entered Thai territory willingly or forcibly in the past and the payment of compensation for the villagers victimised due to Thai aggression. Fourth, Thailand was not explicit about the recognition of Lao sovereignty over the three villages which in Vientiane's view was the "heart of the matter". Laos, therefore, was convinced that the statement on the withdrawal of Thai troops was not designed "to normalise the situation on the Lao-Thai frontier and the relations between the two countries", but to woo the world community to achieve its ends. Phoune hence told the UN Security Council:

Its [Thailand's] aim, in fact, is to mislead international and Thai public opinion ... and also to win the confidence of the international community in the Thai desire for peace in order to seek support for Thailand's candidacy for membership of the Security Council. 93

Frustrated Lao leadership finally informed UN Security Council 94 that Vientiane was committed to settle the border row with Bangkok through peaceful means failing which it was "determined to exercise its legitimate right of self-defence to preserve its independence, sovereignty and territorial

93. Ibid, p.36.

94. For Text of the statement made by Soubanh Srithirath, Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of the LPDR, in the UN Security Council on October 9, 1984, see Ibid, pp.46-59.
integrity" in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter which read: "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations ... " By saying so Laos hinted that it would not hesitate to take recourse to arms to achieve what it failed to accomplish through peaceful means. Whether Vientiane really meant what it said was a matter of conjecture, but its military threat was largely intended to bring more pressure on Bangkok.

The statements made by Birabhornse Kasemsri, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative of Thailand to the United Nations, in the Security Council on October 9, 1984 looked more a rejoinder to the charges levelled by Laos against Thailand than a policy statement. With regard to the pullout of Thai troops, Kasemsri clarified that his country "had removed Thai military presence from the three villages". He also said impliedly that administrative personnel also were sent packing. To quote Kasemsri:


... With regard to our conciliatory initiative and effort to remove the Thai military presence from the three villages, he [Soubanhrithirath] said that we did not remove our troops or even if we did, then we did not remove the civilian administrative officials or the lightly armed paramilitary forces. I am not a military man, but it would seem that under such difficult circumstances as harassment from the Lao soldiers, and in view of the rather difficult terrain, logically the most vulnerable elements should be removed first rather than left behind without military protection to become easy targets for Lao guns.

With regard to the sending back the inhabitants of the three villages, Kasemsri categorically stated that "Thailand does not harbour any desire for even "a single Lao national". Throwing the ball into the court of Laos, he said: "Indeed, Thailand is already burdened with over 70,000 refugees from Laos, and it would be helpful if Laos were to accept them safely back". Thai representative, however, took exception to Lao Foreign Minister's linking the issue of the three villages to Thailand's candidature for membership on the UN Security Council. To quote him: "This linkage may indeed be the capstone of the whole Lao effort to malign and
vilify Thailand's good name, and to obstruct Thailand's candidature".

For Vientiane it was disappointing that the President of the UN Security Council hailing from a sister socialist country hardly did anything to strengthen the hands of Laos. The urgent session of the UN Security Council, which was convened on October 9, 1984 at the request of Laos to examine the situation on the Lao-Thai border, was declared closed as soon as the representatives of Laos and Thailand made their statements. Neither the urgent session of the UN Security Council passed any resolution nor the UN Security Council or its President issued any statement on the problem.  

Laos' disenchantment with the non-intervention of the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council in the conflict, found expression in the statement of Laotian Ambassador to Bangkok that Laos would pursue the matter in International Court of Justice at the Hague. In any case, the consoling factor for Laos was that its request for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council was conceded offering Vientiane thus one more opportunity to present its case and expose its adversary. Thailand was happy because


Bangkok could avail itself of another opportunity to defend its case and what was more, the UN Security Council did not take any action affecting Thai interests.

Thailand had conceded almost all the demands of Laos save the one relating to Thai recognition of Lao sovereignty over the villages in dispute and the other relating to the payment of compensation to the victims of the three villages. Thailand did withdraw its troops, administrative personnel and police and paramilitary from the disputed villages but not its claims over its sovereign rights over the villages. Thailand continued to insist on deciding the fate of the three villages on the basis of the findings of either a Joint Technical Team or "a fact finding mission of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, with the assistance from Lao and Thai technical experts." Laos, however, continued to reject the Thai proposal fearing that it would create "a precedent for a wholesale revision of the frontier between the two countries".

Bangkok also ignored Laos demand for payment of compensation for the damage caused to the villagers and their properties, for "Thailand denied that any damage had

100. Ibid, p.30.
been caused". Thailand perhaps thought that conceding the demand would amount to admitting that it was an aggressor. Nevertheless, as the Thai representative Kasemsri claimed, Thailand had gone half way to meet Lao demand by proposing that "both sides agree jointly to assess the damages ... and jointly to consider measures of assistance to these victims". But Laos rejected this proposal outright.

Thus, the unresolved border dispute remained an irritant for Laos even after the withdrawal of Thai troops from the disputed territory and the success of Thailand in getting elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Vientiane proposed the resumption of Lao-Thai talks with a view to enticing Thailand to recognise Lao sovereign rights over the three border hamlets. When Vientiane did not give positive response, Laos became highly critical of the Thai government. Orchestrating the tirade against Thailand, Pasason, organ of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, commented that Thailand's refusal to sort out the three villages problem peacefully was a clear proof of Bangkok's continued hostile attitude towards the LPDR. Holding that

102. Ibid.
103. SWB, December 13, 1984.
China was responsible for the Thai intransigence Pasason said: "The Bangkok ruling circles seem to forget how dangerous Beijing hegemonism and expansionism is and to overlook the aspiration of their own people to live in peace and security". 104

Thailand was obliged to react to, what it perceived, vile propaganda of Laos. It took strong exception to the activities of Laotian envoys in Bangkok - circulation of 'White Paper' with maps among media organisations, embassies and universities and holding press conferences - denouncing the Thai government. With a view to curbing such hostile activities, Thai Foreign Ministry drew up a stringent code of conduct for foreign diplomats and consular officials. 105 Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi also wrote a letter to Vientiane government admonishing Lao Ambassador Kamphon Simmalavong for his conduct. 106

Thai Foreign Ministry also released on January 11, 1985 a 'White Paper' entitled Evolution of Thai - Lao Relations which, while making no mention of the ongoing border dispute mainly dealt with what it described as the Vietnamisation of Laos, reasons for which are not far to seek. First, to sow

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104. FBIS, Southeast Asia Report, December 12, 1984, p.27.
106. Ibid.
seeds of discontent, dissension and discard among the Laotians. Second, to retaliate Laos' vituperation of Thailand's China connection. The 'White Paper' emphasised that Laos was gradually and steadily being "Vietnamised" by Hanoi as a result of which national and indigenous characteristics of the Laotian people as a race would extinguish. No wonder Thailand turned down Laotian proposal for peace talks. "How can a country deliver an olive branch and fire shells at the same time?" remarked Thai Foreign Ministry's spokesman Prachayathawi Taethikun.

The clouds of hostility and distrust seemed to be slowly dispelling towards the close of the year 1985 when both Laos and Thailand were found showing interest in courting each other. In his address at the grand rally in celebration of the tenth founding anniversary of the LPDR on December 2, 1985, Lao Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane, while calling for improved relations with Thailand, gesticulated: "we have always attached close attention to the longstanding friendship and good neighbourliness between the Lao people and the Thai people. Our stand is to maintain and develop those good neighbourly relations with the kingdom of Thailand on the basis of the two joint

108. SWB, Nov.30, 1981.
Laotian Vice Premier was still more forthright when he told a press conference two days later:

"We want to hold talks with Thailand at any time - tomorrow or the day after tomorrow - the sooner the better as it would save the people's life". Thailand, which had negatived the Lao proposal for talks in the past, relented, of course largely in order to lessen Laos' dependence on Vietnam.

Laos and Thailand held two rounds of talks in Bangkok on March 25-26, 1987. The talks did not produce concrete results, yet they were considered important. Souban Salitthirat, head of the Lao delegation, hence said: "The atmosphere [over the territorial dispute] is better than in 1984, there has been contact and reasonable discussion. The atmosphere is conducive to a solution". In December 1987 Laotian leaders proposed third round of peace talks which were deadlocked in March 1987. Thailand remained unresponsive. The flames of conflict over the three villages were hardly put off, there developed yet another border bout by the turn of the year 1987.


THREE-MONTH WAR OVER BAN ROM KLAO BORDER DISPUTE

The flames of conflict over the three villages were hardly put off, Laos and Thailand got ready for yet another military showdown in December 1987. This war, unlike the 1984 war which dragged on for a longer period, was brief lasting for three months. Though brief, it had all the characteristics of a full scale war. This undeclared war proved so costly that both sides saw wisdom in suing for peace.

BACKGROUND

As Martin Stuart-Fox has pointed out, the source of this conflict and the three villages dispute was the same - "differing interpretations of the 1907 treaty" concluded between Thailand and France demarcating the border on the Laos and Thailand. The 1907 treaty clearly stated that the watershed of the river Heuong formed the boundary between Laos and Thailand. River Heuong has two tributaries. While Thailand claimed that its territory extended up to a tributary called Heuong Nga, Laos considered another tributary called Heuong Man to be the boundary. While Thailand asserted that the disputed area formed part of

Chatta karn district, Phitsanulok province, Laos claimed it to be situated in Botene district, Sayaboury province. In any case the dispute was over the ownership of about 70 square kilometers of land [Ban Rom Klao] which was much larger than the extent of territory of dispute over which the two countries went to war in 1984.  

In the past, neither Thailand nor Laos paid much attention to the disputed area which was made up mostly of forest covered hills, serving as a safe haven for smugglers and anti-government rebels. However, this obscure area came in the limelight in mid-December 1987. Problem started when a Thai logging company operating in the disputed area while apparently discontinuing greasing the palms of local Lao militia, began to offer protection money to a Thai paramilitary unit. This version of the origin of the


115. Fox, n. 112, p.84.
conflict by Martin Stuart Fox could not be cross checked for no other source says so. In any case, while Lao force tried to stop the Thai loggers from "illegally felling trees in Laos", Thai army entered the fray in support of the loggers. Thai contention was that the Lao troops entered the disputed area in June 1987 and attacked Thai loggers. 116

Fierce fighting commenced on December 15, 1987 when Thai troops massed to drive the Lao troops out of the contested area. FEER described the war as "the most serious outbreak of fighting between these two neighbours" since the establishment of the LPDR in 1975. 117 Both the sides used heavy artillery while Laos used some weapons "made in the United States", but captured by the Lao communists during the period of American engagement in Indochina, Thailand used F-5 fighter-bombers, procured from the United States, to strike Lao strongholds. 118 According to Thai officials, about 100 Thai soldiers were killed and several hundred more wounded. 119 Thailand also lost two warplanes. The war cost Thai military US \$ 80 million. 120 Vientiane government did

116. Asia 1989 Year Book, p.160, See also Memorandum n.113, p.3
117. Asia 1989 Year Book, p.160, See also Memorandum, n.113, p.4
120. Fox n.112, p.84.
not give exact figures of casualties, but simply said that Thai Jet fighters had dropped bombs and heavy artillery shelled on Lao territory indiscriminately sometimes reaching 30 Km. deep inside it causing heavy loss of lives and damage to the local population's properties. However, Thai sources estimated that more than 400 Lao soldiers killed and 600 wounded.

ATTEMPTS BY LAOS TO INTERNATIONALISE THE ISSUE

In order to win international sympathy and support for its cause, Laos repeated the strategy adopted during the 1984 war. Being a full member of the NAM, Laos, soon after the outbreak of hostilities, informed the Chairman of NAM about the violation of its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity by the troops of Thailand. On December 17, 1987, the permanent representative of the LPDR at the UN handed a letter to the UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar about Thai aggression. With a view to attracting international attention mass rallies were organised in different parts of Laos denouncing Thai border attacks.

121. Memorandum, n.113, p.4.
124. Ibid.
125. Ibid.
International community could not remain indifferent to the war going on between Thailand and Laos. While pointing out that the escalation of war would not only lead to the deterioration of relations between the two countries, but also worsen the situation in the whole of the Southeast Asian region, Soviet Union appealed to Thailand to enter into negotiations with Laos. A similar appeal was made by Vietnam, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar not only urged Thailand to stop the fighting but also offered his good offices to bring the conflict to an early end.

PEACE INITIATIVES

Growing international concern and more than anything the heavy losses sustained due to the escalation of the fighting, convinced both Laos and Thailand to seek peace. In an urgent telegram sent to his Thai counterpart, Kaysone Phomvihane, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the LPDR, proposed the settlement of the border problem through "consultation" between the armies of the two countries.


127. Ibid.


130. Memorandum n.113, p.23.
Reacting promptly and positively Thai Premier Prem Tinsulanonda wrote to his LPDR counterpart: "we shall be pleased to welcome your military delegation [for peace talks] in Bangkok on February, 1988." However, one should not ignore the key role played by the Thai former Premier Kriangsak Chamanond by paying two unofficial visits to Vientiane to persuade Lao Premier Kaysone Phomvihane to strive for a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

CEASE-FIRE AGREEMENT, FEBRUARY 17, 1988

Reflecting their determination to give an early end to "the worst Thai - Laotian border fighting in 40 years", Thailand and Laos began peace talks in earnest in the Thai capital on February 16, 1988. While the Thai military delegation was led by the Thai chief of Army Gen. Chaovalit


132. Kriangsak Chamonond was the only Thai leader to maintain close rapport with premier Kaysone. It was these two leaders who signed Lao-Thai and Thai-Lao peace agreements of 1979. Kriangsak was instrumental in arranging peace talks between Thailand and Laos. He visited Vientiane on February 6-9, 1988 and again on February 13-14, 1988 during which he convinced premier Kaysone to seek a negotiated settlement of the problem. It is interesting to note that two days after Kriangsak's first visit to Vientiane that premier Kayone sent an urgent telegram to the Thai Premier Prem proposing peace talks. Fox, n.113, p. 84, Bangkok Post, May 21, 1988.

Yongchayudh, the Lao military delegation was led by the Chief of Staff Gen. Sisavat Koebounphan. After two days of talks, they concluded a cease-fire agreement on February 17, 1988 which provided for:

1) a cease-fire to come into effect immediately,
2) withdrawal of Thai and Laotian forces three kilometres from the line of contact within 48 hours of the cease-fire coming into force,
3) setting up a joint control Commission to implement and monitor the cease-fire,
4) instructing the forces on both sides of the border to avoid border clashes and to cooperate with each other “in a spirit of understanding”, and
5) commencement of negotiations on the border dispute within 15 days.134

The cease-fire agreement which put an end, as Lao Premier Kaysone said, “to the senseless loss of life”135, was hailed by the government and people of Laos.136 The same was not the case with Thailand where military and civilian

leaders joined to oppose the pact. They remained irreconcilable because of their national pride and feelings of superiority. Withdrawal of Thai troops from the occupied areas made them recall the 1984 war when Thailand took a similar step. Thai former Premier Kukrit Pramoj, while observing that the truce was a Thai defeat, suggested Thai troops torch the Laotian capital, Vientiane.

Situation was so bad that Gen. Chaovalit, who signed the pact on behalf of Thailand, had to come out with a statement defending the agreement. He said that he realised that some Thais might not feel happy with the cease-fire agreement. However, he reminded them that the country would benefit from the accord. Earlier, soon after initialising the pact, Gen. Chaovalit said in an upbeat mood: "From now on, the Mekong will not only be a river of peace and friendship, but also a river of close bonds.

Internationally too the cease-fire accord came in for appreciation. In a congratulatory letter to the Thai Foreign

Minister Siddhi Savetsila, UN Secretary-General said that he was "most gratified" to learn that Thailand and Laos signed cease-fire pact. 142

Thais and Laotians implemented the cease-fire agreement faithfully. Guns fell silent on February 19, 1988 thus bringing to an end the hostilities commenced on December 15, 1987. Thai as well as Laotian troops pulled back to three kilometres from their line of contact. Process of demobilisation of landmines in the combat zone was undertaken by bomb experts of both sides under the supervision of the joint military coordinating group. Prisoners of war were exchanged.

In order to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict, two rounds of talks were held in March 1988, but to no avail. As Stuart-Fox has pointed out, the two sides were unable "to agree even upon a modus operandi for delineation of their disputed border". 143 Eventhough the Thais and Laotians failed to reach an agreement on border differences, they agreed to continue cease-fire indefinitely and to prevent the resumption of bloodshed between the two countries. The pledge made jointly by the Lao and Thai Armies in October 1988 said:

143. Fox, n. 112, p.84.
Henceforth, the two supreme commands of the Lao and Thai armies pledged to both the Lao and Thai peoples that we will end all hostile acts against each other in the air, on the water, and on the ground along the entire stretch of Lao-Thai border into a border of lasting friendship, peace and alliance.144

Thus the 1987-88 border conflict, like the previous one, remained unresolved. However, this did not prevent upswing in Lao-Thai cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, communications, technology, culture and tourism. It looked solution to the border problem had to wait until there was spectacular growth in Lao-Thai ties.

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