

Comparative Connections

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U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations:

U.S. Responds to Southeast Asian Political Turmoil

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The cancellation of a draft peace agreement between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Philippine government triggered renewed violence in the Philippine south and allegations that U.S. forces are involved in Philippine armed forces suppression activities. Both Manila and Washington deny the charges, though U.S. Special Operations Forces have been training the Philippine military in Mindanao since 2002. The U.S. has added new sanctions against Burma's junta and continues to criticize its political repression, while aid for the victims of Cyclone *Nargis* remains under the Burmese military's control. Ratification for ASEAN's new Charter by its member states has been achieved by eight of the 10 countries. The delays include concerns in the Indonesian and Philippine legislatures about Burma's detention of Aung San Suu Kyi as well as the junta's insistence that any ASEAN Human Rights Commission be toothless. The U.S. State Department has expressed concern over the Malaysian government's arrest of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim on suspicious sodomy charges. Malaysian leaders responded angrily that the U.S. complaint constitutes interference in Kuala Lumpur's domestic politics and that Washington is not "the policeman of the world."

Mindanao peace agreement collapses while U.S. military role challenged

A significant deterioration in relations between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao occurred in early August when the draft Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) was placed on hold by the Philippine Supreme Court, which ruled that it may be unconstitutional. By ceding the MILF territory, the Supreme Court was concerned that a "sub-state" would be created in Mindanao in violation of Philippine sovereignty. (For an excellent synopsis, see *PacNet #45* by Carl Baker, "Looking Forward in Mindanao"). The result has been that an agreement carefully negotiated over three-and-one-half years, which both parties concurred requires a change in the Philippine Constitution, has collapsed.

Since the Supreme Court decision, violence has dramatically escalated in Mindanao as breakaway elements of the MILF (the so-called "lost commands") have attacked Philippine forces and civilians, displacing tens of thousands from their home villages. The Philippine President's Office exacerbated the conflict by insisting that no future negotiations would occur until MILF forces had been disarmed, demobilized and rehabilitated, in effect renewing the state of war between the Philippine government and the MILF that had been suspended in a 2001 truce agreement.

Political speculation has swirled around these developments, led by those opposed to President Arroyo as well as nationalist commentators suspicious of the U.S. military presence in the region. The former believe that Arroyo would use an amendment to the constitution for the creation of an extended Moro homeland also to extend her term of office by changing the structure of government from a presidential to a parliamentary system in which she could continue as prime minister. The latter argue that the deterioration of security in Mindanao provides an excuse for the U.S. to expand its limited Special Forces training presence in the south to a permanent and expanded deployment with permanent bases. Some have argued that Washington wants a separate state in Mindanao to balance Manila's improved relations with Beijing. They point to the negotiations for a Moro homeland and U.S. Ambassador Kristie Kenney's participation. The U.S. regularly insists that U.S. forces rotate through the Philippines exclusively for joint exercises with their Philippine counterparts in the *Balikitan* series and for training Philippine soldiers in counterinsurgency operations in the south. Washington is particularly interested in disrupting the radical Islamist group, Abu Sayyaf, which allegedly receives assistance from Jemmah Islamiyah in exchange for training facilities in MILF-controlled territory. Washington also insists U.S. forces are prohibited from combat in the Philippines, though there have been reports that some U.S. soldiers have helped evacuate wounded while accompanying Philippine patrols in an advisory capacity. They have also been seen removing unexploded ordnance after battles. Philippine media report that the U.S. additionally provides intelligence to Philippine forces through electronic eavesdropping and Unaccompanied Aerial Vehicle surveillance.

On Aug. 19, as Moro rebel attacks racked parts of Mindanao, U.S. Ambassador Kenney reaffirmed Washington's commitment to provide millions of dollars in economic assistance to the south. Kenney said she remained hopeful that the Philippine government and the MILF would return to the negotiating table. Between 1996 and 2006, the U.S. Agency for International Development injected \$292 million into the troubled region. An additional \$25 million in aid this year is tied to the now moribund peace process

There is no doubt that peace negotiations have been derailed. In retrospect, President Arroyo's failure to consult Christian communities before the agreement was finalized probably insured Christian opposition and the subsequent challenge in the Supreme Court. Opponents of the MILF are threatening to create their own militias outside the control of the Philippine military. Malaysia is particularly upset with Philippine developments. Kuala Lumpur had provided its own good offices to both sides over the past five years and had demonstrated its confidence in the outcome by encouraging Malaysian businesses to invest in Mindanao. The MOA-AD was about to be signed in Kuala Lumpur when it was cancelled by the Philippines.

U.S. officials have also been in contact with MILF and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leaders over the years in hopes of cultivating moderate, pro-U.S. elites. It is noteworthy that neither of these Moro political organizations have asked the U.S. to leave the region. Both have also denied any ties to Jemmah Islamiyah or Abu Sayyaf and have indicated a willingness to cooperate with U.S. forces to keep development aid flowing.

Burmese junta still controlling cyclone aid while U.S. adds further sanctions

Although the UN and ASEAN are serving as conduits for aid to Burma's Cyclone Nargis victims, less than half of the \$201 million target had been provided by July because many donors are suspicious about rumored restrictions on assistance delivery by the military junta. Burma's leaders insist that all international aid groups clear their travel and aid distribution with several different government agencies. Military commands in the Irrawaddy Delta region require aid organizations to specify the exact village they intend to visit, the supplies they are providing, and they must be accompanied by a government official. Moreover, domestic relief donors have been obstructed from helping fellow citizens – some aid providers being arrested in the course of their ministrations. The junta appears to want complete control of both aid distribution and supplies. Bureaucratically imposed delays have led to international aid shipments being transferred to government warehouses, from which they later appear on local markets at inflated prices. As international attention to the crisis wanes, the junta is treating aid more as a national security problem than a humanitarian activity. Responding to these developments in late June, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill urging U.S. agencies to avoid moving humanitarian relief through the Burmese authorities. Nevertheless, in early July, Burma granted visas for 1,670 foreign aid workers and experts, of which 498 were from ASEAN states.

On July 21, a joint report by ASEAN, the UN, and the Burmese government stated that cyclone recovery in the delta region would cost \$1.3 billion over three years. Although there appeared to be neither starvation nor epidemics, “many people remain in desperate need of help ... especially food and housing,” according to Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo. The Burmese regime said it would rebuild the affected areas with its own resources. In any case, the \$1.3 billion that the UN and ASEAN agreed necessary for recovery was considerably less than the \$11 billion requested by the junta in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone.

Meanwhile, Washington continues to pile on sanctions against Burma's military leaders, though there is no evidence of their efficacy in changing the junta's behavior. On July 23, the U.S. Congress passed the Block Burmese Jade Act which prohibits U.S. companies from importing gemstones from Burma and expands financial sanctions against the junta's leaders. Congressman Howard Berman, chairman of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, averred: “This bill hits the Burmese leaders where it hurts – in the wallet. It is our hope that these sanctions will push other countries to examine their own dealings with Burma.” The legislation also blocks Burmese gems from entering the U.S. market via third-party countries and declares Burmese regime leaders and their families ineligible for visas to the United States. Essentially symbolic, the sanctions have stopped short of impacting major U.S. oil companies, including Chevron, which has a major share of the Yadona natural gas project in Burmese waters.

Attending ASEAN's late July post-ministerial conference in Singapore, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Burma “badly out of step” with the world community, particularly since ASEAN's new Charter, which Burma has signed, “aspires to rule of law, human rights, [and] development of more pluralistic political systems” Rice went on to praise ASEAN as an “international clearing house” for aid to Burma's cyclone victims, but urged the Association to push Burma toward democracy and support the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest

so that the opposition can participate in Burma's political future. The ASEAN foreign ministers repeated the Association's earlier call for Suu Kyi's release along with other political detainees and asked the junta to engage them in implementing the regime's much criticized "roadmap to democracy." As in the past, these appeals have been ignored by Burma's ruling generals. However, in late September, Burma did announce the release over 9,000 prisoners including the country's longest-serving political prisoner, Win Tin.

In his last official visit as president to Asia in early August, President and Mrs. Bush both focused on the plight of Burma's people. The president had a private lunch with leaders of Burma's exile community living in Thailand, while Laura Bush visited a refugee camp near the border in Mae Sot, which houses over 40,000 Karen refugees. Some of the Burmese exile leaders urged the U.S. to change its policy and engage the junta rather than isolate it, but Bush responded that the regime was not open to engagement. Thai media on Bush's visit expressed some dismay that he chose Thailand as the location from which to sharply criticize Burma and China, given the fact that the Thai government maintains cordial relations with the junta and the PRC and has significant economic ties to both. One commentator in the *Bangkok Post* expressed hope that the next U.S. president will "see Asia as much more than just North Korea in the northeast and Burma in the southeast."

ASEAN remains involved in Burma relief, struggles with Charter's future

At ASEAN's annual July foreign ministers gathering, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon sent a message praising the Association for its "constructive" role in drawing up a recovery plan for Burma where 138,000 people had died or were missing since early May's Cyclone *Nargis*. The ASEAN officials also expressed their "deep disappointment" over the extension of Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest for another year and called for her release as well as for the freedom of all other political prisoners. This was the first time that ASEAN specifically named Suu Kyi in one of its communiqués. Brushing aside ASEAN's appeal, Burma's Foreign Minister Nyan Win at a July 21 closed-door session on ASEAN human rights stated that Burma would oppose any effort to give a Southeast Asian human rights body the power to monitor or investigate human rights practices in the region. He insisted that any rights body should not have the power to impose sanctions or seek prosecution of violators. Burma has stated that the planned human rights commission should serve only as a "consultative mechanism" and not to "shame and blame" any ASEAN nation.

Indeed, the Charter, on which the Association's future as a legal entity hinges, must be ratified by all 10 members. Two of the five founders – Indonesia and the Philippines – had not yet ratified by September 2008. Without the Charter's imprimatur, new security, economic, and social-cultural communities cannot be created. Philippine legislators object to Burma's continued house arrest of opposition leader Suu Kyi, Indonesian lawmakers are skeptical of a proposed human rights body that has no provisions for sanctions against state violators.

ASEAN has also appeared unable to mediate the latest dispute among its members – the future of the area along the border between Cambodia and Thailand surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple, which, at Cambodia's request, was listed as a World Heritage Site on July 7. The issue became embroiled in domestic Thai politics and used by the opposition People's Alliance for Democracy

(PAD) movement to try to oust Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej from office. Armed forces of the two countries have faced off across the disputed border, though no hostilities were reported until early October when there reports of soldiers being wounded after shots were fired. Bangkok rejected ASEAN's offer to mediate, raising questions once again about the Association's ability to deal with disputes among its own members. This does not bode well for the future of an ASEAN political-security community. In a grouping that includes authoritarian states, democracies, semi-democracies, a military dictatorship, and an absolute monarchy, political cohesiveness will be difficult to achieve.

In late August, the outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia Joseph Mussumeli said that if bilateral negotiations on the Thai-Cambodia border dispute do not succeed, then ASEAN should try once again to mediate before the disputants appeal to the United Nations Security Council. Earlier, Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo insisted that the U.S.-ASEAN relationship would remain "a key pillar" in the evolving political and security architecture of Southeast Asia regardless of which party wins the next U.S. presidential election.

U.S. protests new allegations against Malaysian opposition leader

Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, who is challenging the ruling Barisan National Party on behalf of his Pakatan Rakyat, has been charged with sodomy by a former aide in what appears to be a desperate attempt by the ruling party to discredit Anwar. The allegation is viewed by the Malaysian population as the repetition of a trumped up charge that had been leveled against Anwar a decade earlier, leading to his incarceration and subsequent vindication by the courts after Anwar's former nemesis, Mahathir Mohammad, left office.

On June 30, the U.S. weighed in on the controversy when State Department spokesman Tom Casey stated that Washington opposes any form of "politically motivated" investigation of the sodomy charge. Casey stated: "The main point for us is that the rule of law needs to apply. And we would certainly oppose any use of law enforcement procedures for anything other than legitimate purposes of the law ... and would not be for anything that was a politically motivated investigation or prosecution." The U.S. statement was a veiled reference to Anwar's earlier prosecution on a similar charge that led to his arrest and beating by a high-level police official (who was subsequently forced to resign).

Malaysia's Home Minister Syed Hamid replied in a high dudgeon on July 2, insisting that Washington had no right to interfere in Malaysia's domestic affairs. Syed went on to say that Anwar is too close to Washington: "Anwar is a snitch for America. Every time anything happens, he reports back to America." Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi also sent a protest note to Washington that assured the U.S. that all court cases are handled fairly and professionally. Nevertheless, the chairman of the Malaysian opposition Democratic Action Party said that other countries had the right to make observations about Malaysia since Kuala Lumpur frequently commented on "their legal, political systems, and things that are going on."

By July 6, Anwar had hit back, challenging the government to prove that he was an American "snitch" or publicly apologize. Anwar also condemned the hypocrisy of the current Malaysian

government for not criticizing former Prime Minister Mahathir who was “giving out millions” to U.S. lobbyists when in office to obtain a meeting with U.S. President George W. Bush.

Subsequently, when Anwar was briefly arrested in mid-July, the State Department once again raised “serious questions and concerns” and urged Malaysian authorities “to resolve this matter in a manner that builds confidence in the impartial law in Malaysia.” Both major U.S. political parties joined official expressions of U.S. concern. On July 24, Secretary Rice in Singapore for the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting averred: “We are always going to speak up on human rights cases, political cases, but we do so in a spirit of respect for Malaysia.” She also rejected Malaysia’s claim that the Anwar case is an internal affair – a response to the protest letter sent to her by Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Rais Yatim. On Aug. 7, as more questions were raised about the veracity of the charge against Anwar, the Malaysian charge d’affaires in Washington was summoned to the State Department and told that in light of “serious questions raised within Malaysia,” Malaysian authorities “should resolve the matter in a manner that builds confidence in the impartial rule of law and the proper functioning of democratic institutions in Malaysia.” In mid-September, Foreign Minister Rais said that repeated U.S. complaints about Malaysian detention practices showed that Washington wanted to be “policeman of the world” and should look at its own backyard where the U.S. continues to hold two Malaysians at Guantanamo, who have yet to be charged.

In late August, Malaysia’s governing party distributed a pamphlet accusing Anwar of being “surrounded by Jews” that featured pictures of him with Paul Wolfowitz and James Wolfensohn, former presidents of the World Bank. An Anwar adviser responded that the only weapon the ruling party can use is xenophobia. Should Anwar become prime minister, his promises threaten the privileged position that has been held by ethnic Malays over the past 40 years.

U.S. praises Cambodia despite election irregularities

Despite opposition party claims that the July 27 national parliamentary elections were marred though widespread voter tampering that allegedly resulted in the removal of tens of thousands of opposition supporters from the rolls, the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh on Aug. 1 issued a statement praising the elections as the freest ever held in the country. The only complaint in the assessment was that the media were biased toward Prime Minister Hun Sen’s Cambodia Peoples Party (CPP). In an implicit refutation of opposition claims of extensive irregularities, the Embassy stated they “were relatively low in number, and they do not appear to have affected the outcome or to have distorted the will of the Cambodian people.” Other international monitors were not so sanguine about the election in which the CPP won just under 60 percent of the vote compared to nearly 21 percent for its nearest rival Sam Rainsy Party. 130 European monitors in a July 29 interim report stated that irregularities called into question the CPP’s margin of victory. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights echoed these concerns along with the use of “threats, intimidation, and inducements” by CPP activists in the course of the campaign but nevertheless acknowledged lower violence compared to earlier elections. The outcome gives the ruling party a greater than two-thirds majority in the Assembly.

On other matters, Secretary Rice on July 23 called on Thailand and Cambodia to settle their border dispute around the Preah Vihear Temple peacefully after both sides deployed troops

adjacent to the temple grounds. Cambodia agreed to postpone discussions with the Thai government until its domestic political turmoil abated.

Cambodia's long-delayed tribunal for the few surviving Khmer Rouge top leaders from the 1970s genocidal regime has faced a shortfall in funds to continue its proceedings. International backers have been hesitant about contributing more money because of kickbacks by the Cambodian court appointees to the CPP. Nevertheless, during Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte's mid-September visit to Phnom Penh, Washington announced it had agreed for the first time to fund the tribunal with a grant of \$1.8 million. Up to now, the U.S. had provided \$7 million for the work of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, an independent organization that collects evidence of Khmer Rouge crimes. The Center has provided much of the documentation prosecutors will use when the tribunal tries the five remaining defendants.

U.S. Pacific Fleet training with Southeast Asian partners

With U.S. elections approaching, the commanding general of U.S. Army, Pacific (USARPAC), Benjamin Mixon, visiting Jakarta in late July, said that the U.S. was committed to fostering multilateral, mutually beneficial cooperation with "regional friends." At the Pacific Armies Management Seminar held in Indonesia, Mixon insisted that U.S. "relationships and partnerships have been and will continue to be a centerpiece of our engagement strategy in the theater." Last April, in a meeting between the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) Commander Adm. Timothy Keating and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudohoyono, Keating singled out China's growing military capability as a serious concern for the region and a major reason for the maintenance of forward deployed U.S. forces.

In the past quarter, the U.S. Pacific Fleet trained with Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. In a five day exercise with the Indonesian navy in July – Naval Engagement Activity – the two navies were involved in coast guard training (with the U.S. Coast Guard), an exercise in the recovery of a sunken ship, and marine training. With Brunei in early August, a Cooperation Afloat and Readiness Training (CARAT) exercise focused on cooperation between land and sea-based forces. Singapore and Malaysian naval forces in mid-August exercised with the U.S. Navy in counterterrorism that included the simulated boarding of a ship suspected of engaging in terrorist activities.

The way ahead: A bumpy road

Political transitions are on the horizon in Southeast Asian states and fraught with significant portents of change. In Thailand, a billionaire populist whose party overwhelmingly won the last election through rural voters but whose corruption, nepotism, and authoritarian ways led to his flight into exile is opposed by a coalition of urban bureaucrats, professionals, and intellectuals who wish to restore an appointed rather than elected Parliament. In the Philippines, the unpopular Arroyo presidency faces two insurgencies – one communist and one Muslim – an economy in disarray, and allegations that she is trying to extend her term in office by changing the constitution from a presidential to a parliamentary system. And, perhaps most significant of all, the long-standing Malaysian political contract that privileges ethnic Malays over the minority Chinese and South Asian communities may be unraveling as a former UMNO minister and

current opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, plans to create a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional coalition that will abolish the country's racial political hierarchy. Should he succeed, one possibility is renewed racial violence as ethnic Malays fight to maintain their privileged status. For the U.S. which has staunchly backed democratic institutions and procedures, these are some of the unexpected consequences to which it may have to adjust.

Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asian Relations July - September 2008

July 4, 2008: Malaysia formally protests to the U.S. for interfering in its internal affairs when Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was accused of sodomy. The State Department earlier stated it would oppose any politically motivated prosecution.

July 8, 2008: U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia Cameron Hume says that travel to Indonesia is safe for foreign tourists as the U.S. lifts its travel warning despite the arrest of terrorist suspects in South Sumatra.

July 15, 2008: U.S. Ambassador to ASEAN Scot Marciel announces that Washington will exchange military attachés with Laos by year's end.

July 17, 2008: The State Department expresses "serious concerns" over the arrest of Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim on sodomy charges.

July 21, 2008: A joint report by ASEAN, the UN, and Burma agrees that the country needs \$1.2 billion in international aid over three years to continue relief and recovery efforts in the cyclone-devastated Irrawaddy Delta.

July 22, 2008: Singapore rejects the U.S. State Department assessment that it does not meet "minimum standards" of the U.S. Tracking Victims Protection Act of 2000. The main U.S. concern seems to be treatment of some of the 180,000 foreign domestic workers.

July 22, 2008: Burma becomes the seventh member country to ratify the ASEAN Charter.

July 23, 2008: Opening the ASEAN-U.S. dialogue, Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo states no major strategic issue in Asia can be resolved without the active participation of the U.S.

July 23, 2008: Secretary of State Rice urges ASEAN countries to put more pressure on Burma to improve human rights, adopt democratic reforms, and free political prisoners.

July 23, 2008: The U.S. Senate following the House of Representatives unanimously approves a bill banning the import of Burmese gemstones, thus expanding financial sanctions against the ruling military junta.

July 23, 2008: At the ASEAN Regional Forum in Singapore, Secretary Rice urges Cambodia and Thailand to peacefully resolve their border dispute over the Preah Vihear Temple grounds.

July 24, 2008: Secretary Rice urges Malaysia to be transparent and follow the rule of law in dealing with allegations that opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim committed sodomy. Rice refers to the charge as a “human rights [and] political case.”

July 29, 2008: The U.S. Treasury announces financial sanctions against ten gem trading companies that are owned or controlled by Burma’s government and whose revenues support the families of the junta’s leaders.

July 29, 2008: A letter from 40 members of the U.S. Congress is sent to the Indonesian government asking it to release two convicted Papuan separatists who were sentenced in 2005 to 15 and 10 years respectively for flying the separatist Papuan flag.

July 30, 2008: Speaking to Asian reporters prior to his trip to the region, President Bush hails strong U.S. relations with ASEAN and pledges continued cooperation.

Aug. 4, 2008: The Cambodian government accepts assistance from the FBI to investigate the July 11 murder of an opposition party-affiliated journalist.

Aug. 4, 2008: The annual U.S. Navy Cooperation Afloat and Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise begins in Brunei. Earlier CARAT exercises this year were held with the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia.

Aug. 5, 2008: Mindanao peace talks collapse when the Philippine government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front cancel the signing of a memorandum of agreement on ancestral domain.

Aug. 7, 2008: In Bangkok for a speech on Asia policy, President Bush calls on Burma’s junta to release opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners.

Aug. 10, 2008: In his National Day Speech, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warns that the city-state’s economy may be in for hard times because of U.S. financial problems that he does not expect see abate until well into 2009.

Aug. 14, 2008: U.S. Embassy, Jakarta objects to Indonesia’s permission for a Lebanon Hezbollah militia television channel to operate in Indonesia. The Department of Information and Communication says the TV channel is not violating any Indonesian regulations.

Aug. 15-21, 2008: In collaboration with navies from Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Brunei, the U.S. Navy conducts the annual Southeast Asia Cooperation against Terrorism (SEACAT) exercise – maritime cooperation against terrorism.

Aug. 24, 2008: Outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia Joseph Mussomeli suggests that ASEAN could help resolve the border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand over the 11th century Preah Vihear Temple.

Aug. 26, 2008: U.S. Army, Pacific (USARPAC) Commander Lt. Gen. Benjamin Mixon at a Pacific Armies Management Seminar in Indonesia says that America's Asian partners "will continue to be a centerpiece of our engagement strategy in the theater."

Sept. 2, 2008: Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej declares a state of emergency in Bangkok to put down a running battle between supporters and opponents of the government.

Sept. 7, 2008: U.S. Embassy, Manila spokesperson Rebecca Thompson states that no U.S. forces are in country permanently, nor are there U.S. bases on Philippine territory, though U.S. forces "come and go" at the invitation of the Philippine government.

Sept. 9, 2008: Thailand's Supreme Court rules that Prime Minister Samak violated the Constitution by accepting payments for appearances on cooking shows while in office, forcing him to resign.

Sept. 10, 2008: U.S. Embassy, Manila spokesperson Thompson says U.S. forces will remain in the Philippines for training and assistance as long as the Philippine government requests.

Sept. 12, 2008: Malaysia's Ambassador to the U.S. is called to the State Department to explain the arrest of Malaysian citizens who had criticized the government on blog sites.

Sept. 14-16, 2008: Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte visits Cambodia to provide \$24 million in health aid through NGOs. He also promises \$1.8 million for the tribunal before which five remaining elderly Khmer Rouge leaders will be tried.

Sept. 16, 2008: Secretary Negroponte urges Cambodia and Thailand to peacefully resolve their dispute bilaterally over the borderlands adjacent to the Preah Vihear Temple.

Sept. 17, 2008: Thailand's Parliament elects Somchai Wongsawat as prime minister.

Sept 17, 2008: Thailand signs an agreement to join Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia in maritime patrols aimed at securing the Malacca Straits.

Sept. 17, 2008: Thailand's Prime Minister Somchai says he is prepared to hold talks with his Cambodian counterpart Hun Sen to resolve the border dispute between the two countries.

Sept. 23, 2008: Burma's military government announces the release of 9,002 prisoners, including the country's longest-serving political prisoner, Win Tin, and four people elected to Parliament in the landslide victory of opposition parties in 1990.

Sept. 25, 2008: Cambodia's Parliament re-elects Hun Sen as prime minister, extending his 23-year tenure, at a session boycotted by parties disputing the results of the July general election.

Oct. 3, 2008: Shots are fired between Thai and Cambodian troops in the region near the temple of Preah Vihear, injuring three soldiers.