

National

ASEAN struggles for unity

Regional Insider
Roger Mitton

IT is not often that a junior member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations kicks the rest of the group in the teeth and then walks off waving a middle finger in the air. But by a combination of deceit, obstinacy and the unprecedented largesse of its Chinese benefactor, that is what Cambodia did 10 days ago at the ASEAN ministerial meeting in Phnom Penh.

And that may be an understatement when all the facts are considered and the visceral rancour with which the group's exasperated members went at each other's throats is fully appreciated.

For sure, ASEAN is unlikely ever to be the same again, and its future existence, at least in its current form, is now debatable.

Global headlines like "Cambodia: The Wrecker of ASEAN Unity" and others even more censorious reflect the gravity of the situation.

As does the way the region's top diplomat, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, jetted off afterwards on

a desperate mission to salvage ASEAN cohesion.

He went first to Manila and Hanoi, where government leaders were enraged at Cambodia's performance; then he went on to Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand to try to calm their nerves.

On Friday, thanks to Marty's efforts alone, ASEAN was able to issue a belated statement a week after the conference had ended – but it was one that merely papered over the earlier disagreements.

Recall that back in January, Prime Minister Hun Sen vowed that as this year's ASEAN chairman, Cambodia would be a neutral mediator in regional disputes such as the South China Sea.

That was never going to be easy, particularly as Beijing insists that it owns virtually the entire sea, while four group members claim large parts of it.

In April, at the first summit under its gavel, Cambodia ignored this earlier promise and instead took Beijing's side and tried to keep the South China Sea issue off the agenda.

It worked up to a point. In public meetings it was not raised, but in private it was intensely discussed.

So, as this column forecast, the topic was certain to be heatedly discussed "at the ministerial meetings in July and the leaders' summit in November. Prepare for fireworks".

The pyrotechnics duly came this month when some analysts claimed China had again told its proxy to sideline the South China Sea issue – actually, they alleged that it had paid Cambodia to do this by means of large investments.

They noted that even the Peace Palace, where the ministerial conference was held, was funded by Beijing.

Thus, like the 2009 repatriation of Uigher refugees and the return of fugitive Frenchman Patrick Devillers this month, Cambodia had little option but to obey its Chinese paymaster and stiff its ASEAN colleagues.

Four of those colleagues, at the end of the conference, drafted a 132-paragraph closing communiqué which mentioned all the topics discussed, including the maritime sovereignty disputes.

When that draft was submitted to the chair, the Cambodians, in a breach of ASEAN protocol, showed it to the Chinese,

who said it was unacceptable unless the South China Sea reference was removed.

So the Cambodians sent it back for amendment.

The Philippines and Vietnam, supported by all other members except Laos and Myanmar, refused to accept this Chinese-mandated decision to doctor their group's statement.

So for the first time in 45 years, no communiqué was issued at the end of an ASEAN ministerial meeting – although thanks to Marty, a face-saving statement was cobbled together a week later.

All told, said Ernest Bower, Southeast Asia Programme director at the Centre for International and Strategic Studies in Washington: "This was a spectacular failure for the regional grouping."

Added Don Emmerson, head of the Southeast Asia Forum at California's Stanford University: "An observer might conclude that China has effectively hired the Cambodian government to do its bidding."

In doing so, it has caused the first major breach of the dyke of regional autonomy and that may well render the creation of a planned ASEAN Community in 2015 dead in the water – pun intended.

rogermitton@gmail.com



A soldier watches over villagers in Kratie province's Chhlong district following a violent eviction in May. HENG CHIVOAN

More confess to Kratie 'secession'

May Titthara

MINISTRY of Interior officials announced yesterday that three more villagers accused of involvement in a "secessionist plot" in Kratie province turned themselves in and confessed their guilt on Saturday, taking advantage of the prime minister's offer of immunity for those who agree to act as witnesses.

National Police spokesman Kirt Chantharith said that, so far, a total of six villagers – out of an undisclosed number of accused – have admitted to planning an autonomous zone in Kratie's Pro Ma village.

"All those villagers will move to be witnesses, and we do not know surely how many more villagers are involved, but it depends on what we hear in court," he said.

In May, Pro Ma was the site of the forced eviction of hundreds of families involved in a long-running land dispute with agro-business company Casotim – an operation in which a 14-year-old girl was shot dead by government forces.

The government has called the eviction an anti-secessionist raid, despite villagers' repeated claims that they were simply applying for land titles.

Sok Tong, 61, one of the five

alleged secessionists initially accused by the Ministry of Interior who has continued to evade arrest, said that pressure from authorities had elicited this latest round of confessions, and went on to challenge authorities to release proof of their guilt.

"Prime Minister Hun Sen has to show evidence that accuses us of creating an autonomous zone, and what is it?" Tong asked. "How can I admit fault, if I did not do anything wrong as they accused me?"

Tong added that the villagers who already confessed had told him that they did so not because they were guilty, but rather to avoid arrest, and because cooperation seemed like their best shot at having their land returned.

Alleged ringleader Bun Ratha, 32, and his father, Bun Chhorn, 55, are still on the run.

Mam Sonado, president of the Association of Democrats and the director of the Beehive radio station, was arrested on July 15 for allegedly masterminding the secessionist plot. According to his attorney, Sok Sam Oeun, Sonado is still being detained at Prey Sar prison, and will seek bail again – after being denied once already – in roughly two weeks.

Land concession cancelled by PM

Phak Seangly

THE Cambodian government has cancelled a 14,981-hectare concession in the Cardamom mountains granted to an Australian firm for a banana plantation, the conservation group Wildlife Alliance has reported.

Wildlife Alliance has long lobbied against the concession in Koh Kong province's southern cardamom forest on which

Indochina Gateway Capital Limited planned a banana plantation.

The project had come under heavy criticism from Wildlife Alliance over concerns it would destroy precious endangered animal habitats.

Suwanna Gauntlett, CEO of Wildlife Alliance, which runs a conservation program in the area in conjunction with the government, said yesterday

Prime Minister Hun Sen had done the right thing by cancelling the concession on July 2.

"We are thrilled that this has happened and we have campaigned for this for 18 months," she said.

"This is one more sign of the government's commitment to protect the Cardamoms."

The concession was cancelled because of fears about its social and environmental

impact and the damage it would do to biodiversity in a so-called "elephant corridor", according to Wildlife Alliance.

It also exceeded a 10,000-hectare restriction on Economic Land Concessions in the 2001 Land Law.

Koh Kong provincial governor Bun Leut declined to comment and officials at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries could not be reached.

COMING SOON!

CAMHOTEL'12

CAMFOOD'12

CAMBODIA'S No.1 INTERNATIONAL HOTEL, RESTAURANT, CATERING, FOOD, DRINKS & WINE SHOW

10 -12 OCTOBER 2012 • DIECC, PHNOM PENH

◆ To Book Your Booth at the Expo, contact: Ms. Sokunthea (kunthea@ambexpo.com)

◆ To visit the Expo. Save USD5 on expo Entrance Ticket. Pre-Register Online Today at www.expocambodia.com

Supported by: Ministry of Commerce, Cambodia; Ministry of Tourism, Cambodia

Hosted by:

Organised & Managed by: **AMB EVENTS**

AMB EVENTS (CAMBODIA) PTE LTD
#240, Street 101, Sangkat Beoung Trabek, Khan Chamkarmorn, Phnom Penh.
Tel: +(855) 23 217 290 / +(855) 23 210 806
Contact: Ms. Sokunthea Email: kunthea@ambexpo.com

www.expocambodia.com

ROOMCHANG
DENTAL & AESTHETIC HOSPITAL
Enriches Life Quality

One of the **Largest** Dental Hospitals in the ASEAN.

The 1st ISO Certified in Cambodia
International standard quality dentistry with uncompromising attention to detail.

☎ 023 211 338 ☎ 011 811 338 (Emergency)
✉ hospital@roomchang.com 🌐 www.roomchang.com
📍 No.4, St.184, Phsar Thmey 3, Daun Penh, 12210, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

SUNTOPWAY SOLAR GROUP

We are here now!

We shall serve Cambodia people with best quality solar panels & various solar systems for schools, hospitals, rurals power station for telecom, etc...

Address: # 236AEo, Mao Tse Toung Blvd, Sangkat Tonuptek, Khan Chamkarn, Phnom Penh
Tel: 023-632 0433, 088-543 3155, 088 7943353
E-mail: vvspe@live.cn website: www.vvspe.com