

The Cambodia Daily ,, July 9, 2008

Preah Vihear Approved as World Heritage Site

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The Cambodia Daily*

The 32nd Session of the World Heritage Committee on Tuesday unanimously approved the inscription of Preah Vihear temple as a World Heritage Site.

Preah Vihear temple became one of 13 new sites protected under the World Heritage List, and allows Cambodia to tap \$4 million in World Heritage Fund set aside for preserving and promoting this years' heritage sites.

According to Unesco, the temple was inscribed for three reasons: its location atop sheer cliffs overlooking a vast plain and mountain range; its architecture adapted to the natural environment and religious function of the temple; and the quality of its carved stone ornamentation. The temple was first nominated for heritage status in 1992, according to the Unesco Web site.

Giovanni Boccardi, Unesco's Chief of Unit for East Asia and the Pacific, said Committee Chair Christina Cameron took up the proposal at about 3 pm Monday in Quebec, which was 2 am Tuesday in Phnom Penh.

"She explained this was a complicated matter," Boccardi said by telephone Tuesday evening. "And then she presented it to the committee. There was no debate and the decision was accepted unanimously," he said.

After the decision, Cabinet Minister Sok An, who led the Cambodian delegation, pledged that Cambodia would do whatever it could to ensure that the site would be protected, Boccardi said.

Thai Foreign Affairs Minister Noppadon Pattama then told the meeting that Thailand objected to the committee's decision and preferred postponing the issue, he said.

The whole process ended in less than 30 minutes, though Boccardi said this was one of the most contentious heritage list applications ever.

"Because of the border issue, I believe that we can rank it among the most difficult. The question was not simply to demonstrate its value but to understand the implications of its inscription for management and ensure that the parties concerned would be ready to cooperate for its protection," he added.

In the weeks leading up the Tuesday's announcement, Thai senators said they would consider withdrawing Thailand from Unesco if the temple was inscribed.

Whether the Thai Cabinet will emerge unscathed remained unclear, however, as the Thai Constitution Court ruled Tuesday that the Thai government's endorsement of Cambodia's heritage bid was unconstitutional without parliamentary approval first.

The entire Thai Cabinet now faces possible impeachment proceedings, according to media reports.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, said Tuesday by telephone that it was Thailand's opposition party, the People's Alliance for Democracy, not the Thai government, that opposed the Preah Vihear's listing.

"The PAD is playing this as though the World Heritage Committee is not paying attention to Thai sovereignty issues," Thitinan Pongsudhirak said.

Despite fears of demonstrations in Bangkok and heightened security at the Cambodian Embassy, the scene was calm in Bangkok, Thitinan said by telephone Tuesday.

"This issue will be used to undermine the government but it has not turned into any anti-Cambodian sentiment. At this time, it is solely directed at the government," he said.

But this could shift, Thitinan warned, depending on what the PAD unearths as it digs for evidence of any possible deals between Cambodian and Thai officials that traded Thailand's claims to the temple for business interests in Cambodia.

"We don't know how it's going to play out," Thitinan said. Security will remain high at the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh for the time being, Foreign Affairs Minister Hor Namhong said at a press conference Tuesday morning.

Council of Ministers advisor Pen Ngoeun, who said he tossed his paperwork into the air at 3 am when he heard the news, said the listing ended months of late nights and headaches.

Now, Unesco will assess the needs of the temple and draw from international funds to revitalize the crumbling structure, he said.

"We will have international cooperation; Thailand included, if Thailand would like to be a part of that," Pen Ngoeun said.

"It's now a World Heritage Site and the responsibility of the world," he said.

Teruo Jinnai, Unesco representative for Cambodia, wrote by email Tuesday that Cambodia still has a lot to do to "be in line with the requirements of the [World Heritage] Convention."

Jinnai said the World Heritage Committee recommended that Cambodia invite Thailand to collaborate for the safeguarding and development of Preah Vihear temple.

A Thai Embassy official who requested anonymity said the embassy had no official response to the World Heritage Committee's decision.

The official said the 20-plus police force guarding the embassy on heightened alert for the past week will be removed Friday.

Information Minister and government spokesman Khieu Kanharith said Tuesday that the temple's inscription did not symbolize a win over Thailand.

Thai opposition parties turned the inscription process into a battle instead of a chance for unity,

Khieu Kanharith wrote by e-mail.

"The Royal Government of Cambodia is pleased with the decision, but we do not consider it as the victory over Thailand for the move to scuttle Cambodian effort was from opposition parties. We expected to promote Preah Vihear as a bond of friendship between the two countries," he said.

Political scientist Raoul Jennar called Cambodia's successful heritage bid a diplomatic feat.

After the blow to bilateral relations from the 2003 anti-Thai riots, Jennar said Phnom Penh found points of interest with Thailand and compromised on key issues to get to the temple listed. By modifying the heritage list proposal to not include contested border areas surrounding the temple, Jennar said Cambodia kept its bid alive and provided an airtight case for the World Heritage Committee.

There was a celebratory mood in Phnom Penh on news of the temple's listing.

At 9:30 am, Royal University of Phnom Penh Director Lav Chhiv Eav read a statement from Prime Minister Hun Sen to 1,000-plus students gathered at the university.

"This is the third great Khmer heritage to be accepted [to the World Heritage List], after Angkor Wat temple in 1992 and Royal Ballet in 2003," Hun Sen said in the statement, which was also broadcast on radio and television.

Council of Ministers spokesman Phay Siphon said every pagoda in every province was instructed to bang their drums simultaneously at 10 am.

At 10:30 am, about 100 people prayed in front of The Royal Palace and offered flowers and fruits to the gods for delivering the temple's inscription, said Moeung Sonn, president of the Khmer Civilization Foundation.

And from 7 pm to 11 pm Tuesday, singers and dancers performed at Phnom Penh's Wat Phnom, in a show that was scheduled to end with fireworks.

Hang Soth, secretary-general of the Preah Vihear National Authority, said guards and vendors celebrated at the temple.

"They were happy and danced," Hang Soth said, adding that only seven Thai demonstrators remain camped on the Thai side of the locked border gate.

The Preah Vihear National Authority is preparing a "huge" ceremony this month at the temple to celebrate the news, Hang Soth said. (Additional reporting by Katie Nelson)