

Visa exemption for Thais and Cambodians

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FOREIGN Ministry spokesman Koy Kuong said yesterday Cambodia and Thailand would sign an agreement next week allowing nationals from each country to cross the border without having to obtain a visa. He said the agreement would be signed during the two-day Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy Summit in Phnom Penh, which begins November 16. "At the ACMECS meeting we have planned to sign this exemption for ordinary passport holders," he said. Thani Thongpakdi, deputy spokesman for the Thai foreign ministry, said he hoped the agreement would be signed "as soon as possible". "Thai nationals and Cambodian nationals [currently] need to get visas [to cross]," he said. "This agreement is about exempting that." He said procedures for crossing the border remain in place, stating that nationals must still pass through designated border gates.

Koy Kuong said yesterday Cambodia has signed similar pacts with ASEAN members Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Laos, Vietnam and Indonesia. Meanwhile, the Thai newspaper The Nation yesterday quoted Thawatchai Samutsakorn – commander of the Thai troops stationed near the Preah Vihear temple – as saying that he would push for the Preah Vihear border gate to be reopened before the New Year so that tourists could visit the temple from the Thai side. But Koy Kuong said the gate would only be opened when Thai troops withdrew from the temple. "Samdech [Hun Sen] stated clearly that if Thailand made the situation normal again, the border gate can open anytime," he said. "It was closed when Thailand sent troops to invade Cambodia." Relations between Thailand and Cambodia soured in July 2008 when the temple was listed as a World Heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. Both countries claim a 4.6-square-kilometre zone adjacent to the temple. Thai parliamentarians are set to meet next month to discuss agreements made between the two countries to undertake joint demarcation and demining projects and to redeploy troops in the area. "The Preah Vihear issue will have to be discussed," Thani Thongpakdi said.

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