

THE IMPACT OF TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN THE LOI LAN REGION AND O-7 HILLOCK ON MYANMAR-THAILAND RELATIONS*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the territorial disputes between Myanmar and Thailand, focusing on two key contested areas: The Loi Lan region and the O-7 Hillock. After Myanmar's independence, it could measure the borders with neighboring countries and sign agreements, but it was not to measure the borders with Thailand. Border disputes arose as the Myanmar government asserted political control and legal influence. Due to the encroachment of Thai military bases in the Loi Lan area, the Myanmar delegation objected to Thai outposts in Myanmar and discussed territorial ownership. Despite discussions, relations between Myanmar and Thailand became strained when Thailand helped SURA attack Myanmar military bases on the Myanmar-Thai border. In addition, the Thai army joined forces with the SURA armed insurgents to carry out further attacks on the O-7 hillock and Pachee Camp. Therefore, due to the attack along the Myanmar-Thai border in early 2001, Myanmar and Thailand relations were diminished. However, the two countries tried to negotiate and resolve the over-the-border issues. This research analyzed Myanmar-Thailand relations regarding the Loi Lan region and the O-7 hillock issues.

Keywords: Myanmar, Thailand, territorial disputes, Loi Lan, O-7 Hillock

Introduction

This paper examines the main causes of tension in Myanmar-Thailand relations. Myanmar and Thailand are Southeast Asian countries bordering each other. Thus, border disputes arose frequently because border measures between the two countries were impossible. This paper will review the territorial disputes between the two countries. The existence of formidable insurgent troops along the Myanmar-Thai border had prevented a direct clash between the two countries. However, once the Myanmar government gained control over the border areas in the early 1990s, bilateral tensions and clashes became more frequent and intense. Myanmar's border with Thailand has become a focus of tension and conflict, and a potential flashpoint on mainland Southeast Asia. Understanding the conflicts between the two countries by accurately analyzing the history of Myanmar-Thailand relations. Being able to examine the political changes that occurred during that period. It aims to consider the difficulties of resolving border disputes between the two countries. In presenting Loi Lan region and O-7 hillock, given from the perspective of historical studies based on literary evidence. The books, papers, newspapers, and speeches of political leaders are presented with major evidence to understand the background of the Loi Lan region and O-7 hillock issues.

Research Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine Myanmar-Thailand relations in the context of the territorial disputes concerning the Loi Lan region and the O-7 Hillock.

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Material and Method

This paper utilizes both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from periodicals, newspapers, and government officials. Secondary sources include published and unpublished books, journals, magazines, websites, and online sources. Numerous documents were gathered from various sources, including the Library of the University of Yangon, the Central Library of the University, and the Library of the History Department at the University of Yangon. Additionally, materials were sourced from websites like Google Scholar. The research employed descriptive qualitative methods to attain a comprehensive perspective.

Overview of Border Demarcation

Myanmar shares a 1,314 mile long border with Thailand. It extends from the confluence of the Mekhong River and the Nam Ruak River (the tri-junction of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand) to Bayin Naung Point (formerly known as Victoria Point). The sector of the Myanmar-Thai boundary between the tri- junction of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos in the east and the Thanlwin River in the west was formally delineated and demarcated by the Burma-Siam Boundary Commission of 1892-93. For the purpose of carrying out the actual on-ground demarcation, the Commission was split into two parties, the Eastern Party and the Western Party. The Eastern Party demarcated the 117-mile-long boundary from Loi Um eastwards to the Mekhong-Mae Huak Junction. The Western Party demarcated the 257-mile-long boundary from Loi Um westwards to the Thanlwin River. Unfortunately, the Eastern Party did not erect any boundary pillars as it was considered unnecessary because the boundary mostly followed conspicuous watersheds or the courses of streams. On the other hand, however, the Western Party erected boundary markers, mainly at places where roads or paths crossed the boundary. In all, 16 boundary markers were erected at an average interval of about 15 miles between Loi Um and the Thanlwin River.

Boundary settlement in 1864-66 was signed at Bangkok in 1868. The Siam-Burma Boundary Commission of 1894-1896 fixed the 940 mile long boundary from Victoria Point to the junction of the Thanlwin River and the Hpa Chaung River. From the junction of the Thanlwin River and the Hpa Chaung River, the boundary follows the course of the Thanlwin River up to its junction with the Thaungyin River and thence along the Thaungyin River up to the source of the Gawli Chaung. No boundary markers were erected in this sector. From the source of the Gawli Chaung to the southern extremity, the boundary follows natural features except near the Payathonezu (Three Pagodas Pass) where the boundary was artificially fixed. There were 49 boundary chains erected on the main watershed on conspicuous hilltops. However, there are cases where local authorities and residents alike are unsure of the exact location of the Myanmar-Thai boundary.¹

Territorial Disputes in the Loi Lan Region

After the independence of Myanmar, it was able to sign an agreement on the border demarcation with neighboring countries such as China, Laos, Bangladesh, and India. However, it was unable to measure the border with Thailand. This was due to Thailand's acceptance and

¹ Country Report Burma 1986, p.31

support of insurgents from Myanmar along the Myanmar-Thai border. During the colonial period, a border treaty was signed between Thailand and the British, but the treaty lacked specific and detailed measurements. As a result, the Thai government planned to create its map, leading to border disputes caused by changes in the water channel and the expansion of Thai territory.¹ The significant of border dispute involved the Loi Lan area in Shan State.

After Mao Zedong came to power in China in 1949, KMT troops fled to Myanmar and settled in the Loi Lan area of Shan State. In the 1950s, the Myanmar government launched attacks against these KMT forces. Although the KMT troops retreated in 1961, the area became a residential area for various armed insurgent groups including some remaining KMT groups, separate Wa insurgents and Khun Sa's Mong Thai Army (MTA). After the withdrawal of the KMT troops, the Loi Lan area became a key route for the opium trade with Thailand, it continued to be a main centre for heroin production and trafficking by ethnic armed groups.² The MTA was formed in 1960 and 1961 as a local pro-government defense organization (Karkweye). Since then, it has gone through various transformations. Between 1976 and 1985, it was known as the Shan United Army (SUA). In March 1985, the SUA succeeded in amalgamating with the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) led by Moe Hein. It was initially renamed the Shan State Army (SSA). However, in order not to be confused with the existing SSA led by Sai Leik (Kalar), the MTA changed its name to the present one. Nevertheless, both the SUA and the SURA retained their separate organizations under the banner of the MTA.³ In early 1989, the MTA, led by Khun Sa, had about 4000 regular troops. It established outposts and strongholds along the Myanmar-Thai border in the north, especially in the areas known as Loi Lan, Homein, and Lwesansaw.[6] There were the MTA operating along the Myanmar-Thai border in the early 1990s. On 5 January 1995, when the MTA forces completely surrendered in the Loi Lan area, the Myanmar Army took over the MTA camps. At the same time, the Thai army entered a parallel area, advancing ten miles into the territory of Myanmar.⁴ Some MTA troops were demobilized and sent home. A few days later, a group led by Ywek Sit, who was present at the surrender ceremony, went back to its former outpost on the pretext of having to collect money from former contacts. Later, Ywek Sit declared that he and his group did not accept the surrender and took up insurgency once again. The group was named the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA). It later changed its name to the Shan State Army (SSA) but the Myanmar government continued to refer to them as the SURA. Since the Thai Army started helping the SURA to launch attacks on Myanmar military outposts along the Myanmar-Thai border, they have become a source of

¹ Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *နယ်နိမိတ်စာချုပ်တွေရှိသော်လည်းနှင့်အထူးဆောင်းပါးများ (Despite the Existence of Conventions on Boundaries)*, Yangon, News and Periodical Enterprises, 2003, p.2 (Hereafter cited as Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *Despite the Existence of Conventions on Boundaries*)

² (a) Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *အမြဲသတိထားရမည့်အိမ်နီးချင်းနှင့်အထူးဆောင်းပါးများ (The Neighbouring Country we will have to always beware of and Special Articles)*, Yangon, Mate Kaung Press, 2002, p.125 (Hereafter cited as Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *The Neighbouring Country we will have to always beware of*)

(b) Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *Despite the Existence of Conventions on Boundaries*, pp.15-17

³ U Aung Zaw, *တပ်မတော်အစိုးရ၏အမျိုးသားပြန်လည်စည်းလုံးညီညွတ်ရေးကြိုးပမ်းဆောင်ရွက်ချက်များ (Government for National Reconsolidation)*, Yangon, 1999, pp.133-134

⁴ (a) Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, The Neighbouring Country we will have to always Beware of*, p.125

(b) Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *Despite the Existence of Conventions on Boundaries*, pp.15-17

tension and conflict between Myanmar and Thailand.¹ In early 1996, the Thai military maintained seven military outposts, manned by about 550 troops, in the area.² Thai troops deployed across three miles wide in this area.³ Therefore, Myanmar asserted its ownership of the Loi Lan area at the 12th RBC meeting held in Mawlamyaing, Myanmar from 19 to 22 February 1996, the Myanmar delegation protested against the presence of Thai outposts inside Myanmar territory and discussed the demarcation of the border. At the 13th RBC meeting held in Phitsanulok, Thailand from 18 to 21 June 1996, the Myanmar delegation asserted again that the disputed area belonged to Myanmar. Myanmar further provided evidence by stating that a pagoda had been built in this area since 1986, establishing it as Myanmar territory. Thai Commander-in-Chief General Viroj Saengsnit mentioned that it cost the Thai Army 100 million baht annually to maintain forces in the Loi Lan area.⁴ Ultimately, the longstanding presence of multiple armed groups in the Loi Lan area has heightened tensions in the region, prompting Myanmar firmly to assert its territorial claims and pursue diplomatic resolutions.

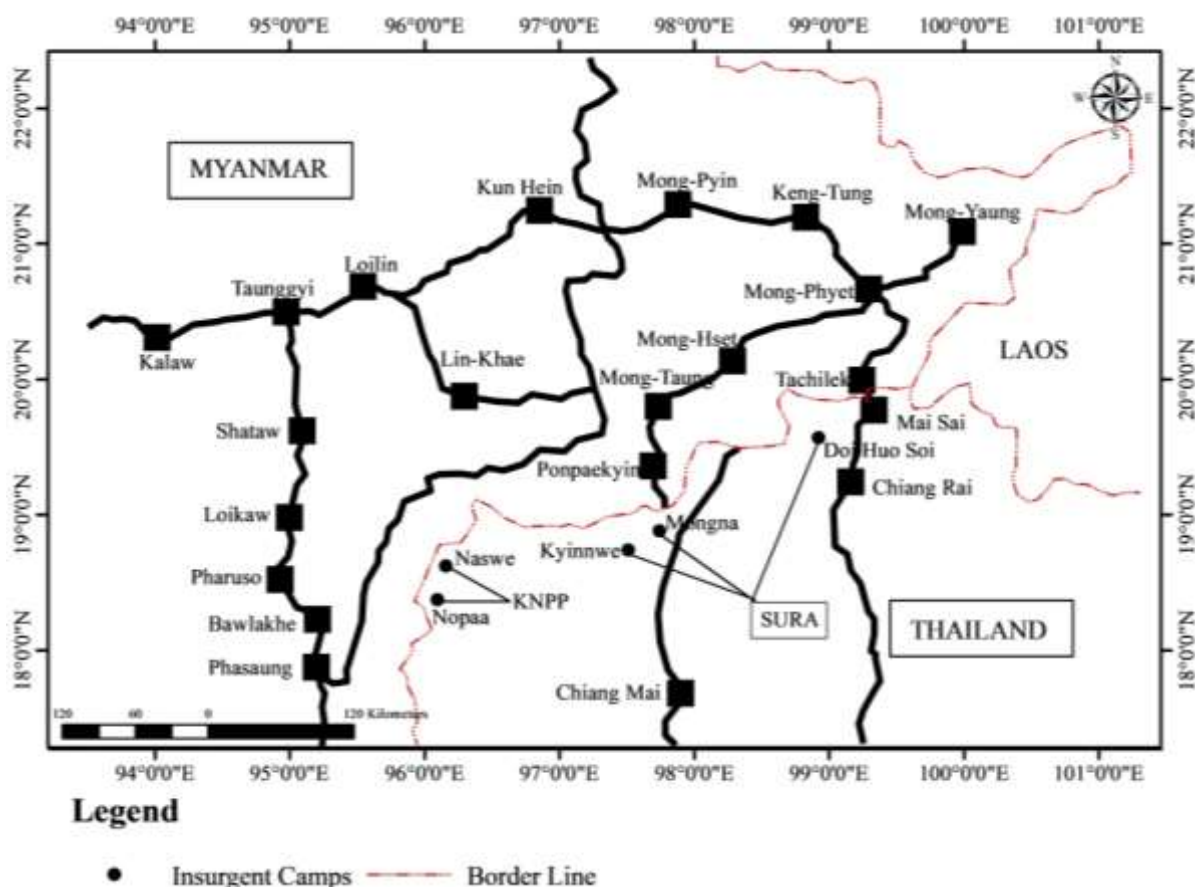


Figure 1. Map of Location of insurgent camps inside Thailand⁵

¹ အရှေ့ပိုင်းတိုင်းစစ်ဌာနချုပ်၏ ၁-၉-၈၈ မှ ၃၁-၁၂-၈၈အတွင်း စစ်ဆင်ရေးသုံးသပ်ချက် (Assessment of Military Operations in Eastern Command HQ Area (1 September 1988 to 31 December 1988)), pp.94,126

² Bangkok Post, 22 June 1996, p.1

³ (a) Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *The Neighbouring Country we will have to always beware of*, p.125

(b) Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *Despite the Existence of Conventions on Boundaries*, pp.15-17

⁴ Bangkok Post, 22 June 1996, p.1

⁵ Watching For Long Didn't Say and Special Articles, Yangon, News and Periodicals Enterprise, 2001, p.13 (Hereafter cited as *Watching For Long Didn't Say*)

The Thai Army had set up a special command task force under the 7th Infantry Regiment to guard the disputed area since 2 January 1996.¹ In February 1997, General Chettha Thanajaro, the Thai Army Commander-in-Chief, suggested that the area be turned into a military-free-zone.² However, it was never realized. Although both sides had built up their troops along the border, the area under dispute was remarkably peaceful. Soldiers from both sides played volleyball and chinlone (takraw) together in the evenings on a playground jointly constructed for daily sports activities, and officers dined together from time to time. Myanmar soldiers were also allowed to buy daily fresh food from Thai villages. In the meantime, on the night of 26 October 1997, a group of Thai officials removed the temporary landmark pillar with a bulldozer from the Myanmar-Thai border near BP.1. The Myanmar government did not make any public protest or statement on the incident. It was resolved peacefully. Although the Myanmar government interpreted it as a forced cession of Myanmar territory, it never exploited the situation to sensationalize the issue to make the other party look bad. Instead, the Myanmar government planned to make a formal protest at the Township Border Committees (TBC) meeting. Five days later, as the Thai authorities came to realize that the issue would be brought up at the TBC meeting, a group of Thai soldiers led by Colonel Watanachai, Commander of 7th Infantry Regiment of the 4th Division of the Third Army, returned the pillar to the Myanmar authorities.³ This incident highlights the delicate balance of cooperation and tension along the Myanmar-Thai border, as both sides handled conflicts peacefully while still having disagreements about territory.

In December 1997, the Thai military deployed a Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) battalion consisting of artillery and paratroopers to the disputed Loi Lan region as a special operation. The Thai Army Chief of Defense General Chettha Thanajaro stated that Thailand and Myanmar need to withdraw their troops from the Loi Lan region as there is no agreement yet.⁴ He stated this action was only to boost Thailand's defense.⁵ In July 1998, Third Army Chief of Defense Lt. General Sommai Vichavorn mentioned that the Thai military had established seven military outposts along the border to prevent intrusion.⁶ In late 1998, about 775 Thai troops were still in the area. Since 1 October 1998, the 138th Cavalry Battalion has been working on special duty as an operational unit.⁷ In the disputed area, the Thai military established eleven military outposts manned by cavalry and paramilitary forces about 500 to 800, in early 2000.⁸ The Thai Army learned that the Myanmar Army had also deployed several battalions in the area. The Thai troops in the disputed area are outnumbered by the Myanmar troops, stated Colonel Akradet Songworawit, Commander of the Third Cavalry Regiment.⁹ The Thai Army Commander-in-Chief General Surayud Chulanont arrived on 31 March 2000, to inspect troops in the disputed area.¹⁰ According to Myanmar media in January 2001, of the thirty-four Thai military outposts

¹ Bangkok Post, 20 December 1996, p.3

² Ibid, 24 February 1997, p.2

³ မြန်မာအလင်းသတင်းစာ (Myanma Alin Newspaper), 21 February 2001, p.4

⁴ Bangkok Post, 29 December 1997, p.5

⁵ Ibid, 30 December 1997, p.8

⁶ Ibid, 20 July 1998, p.4

⁷ Ibid, 20 December 1998, p.1

⁸ Ibid, 1 March 2000, p.3

⁹ Ibid, 20 December 1998, p.9

¹⁰ Ibid, 1 April 2000, p.1

inside Myanmar territory, nine were located along the border. Both forces deployed within the Loi Lan area, there were Thirty-four Thai Army units stationed in the Loi Lan area, nine of which were along the border.¹ The Loi Lan area is a strategic location affected by both historical conflicts and contemporary geopolitical tensions, illustrating the ongoing challenges in Myanmar-Thai border relations.

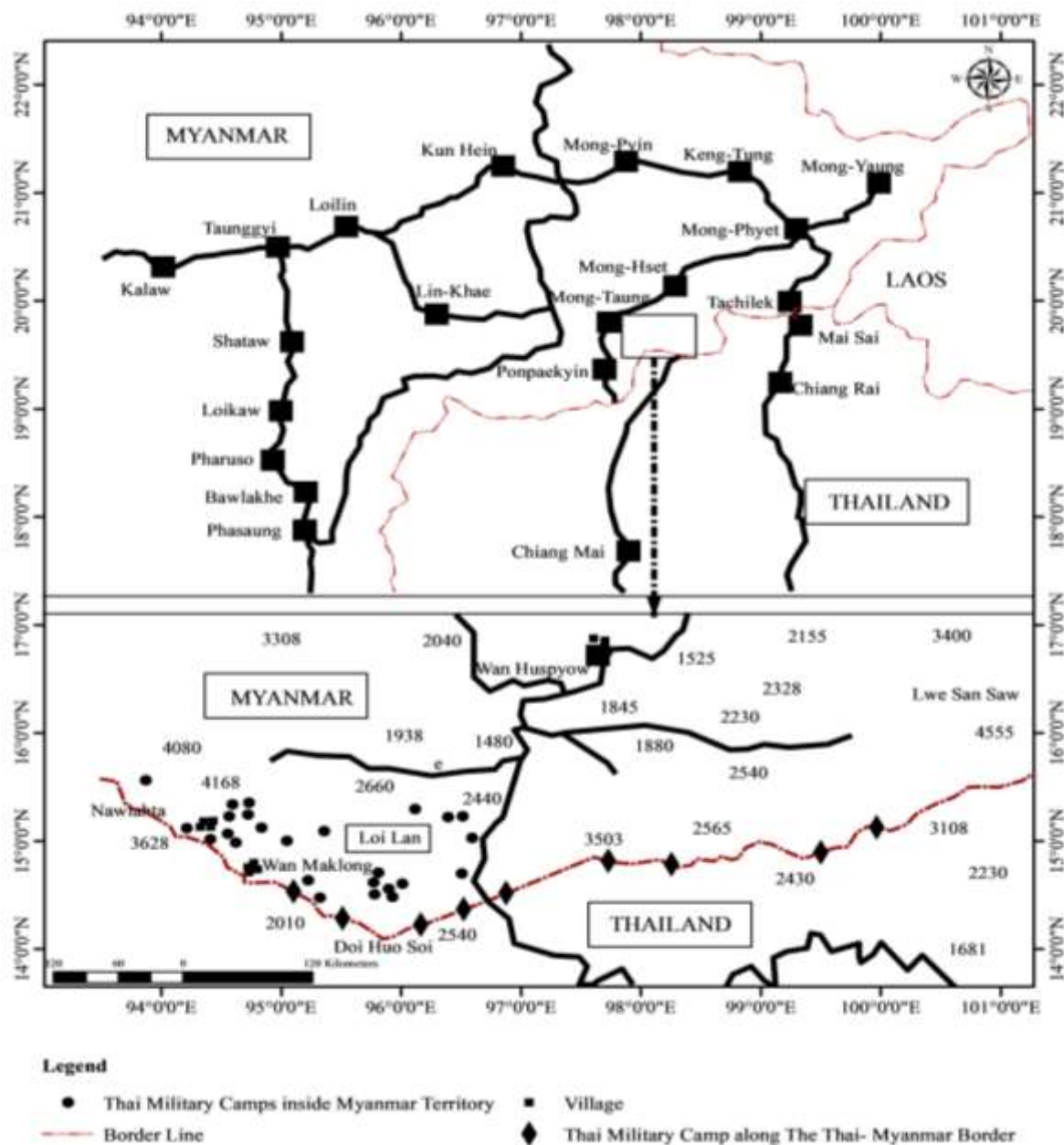


Figure 2. Map of Thai military camps inside Myanmar and along the Myanmar-Thai border²

¹ (a) Maung Aung Myo, *Neither Friend Nor Foe, Myanmar's Relations with Thailand Since 1988*, Institute, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2002, p.121 (Hereafter cited as *Neither Friend Nor Foe*)

(b) Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, *The Neighbouring Country we will have to always beware of*, p.125

² Watching For Long Didn't Say, p.23

Territorial Disputes in O-7 Hillock

In early 2001, a military clash took place in the area. On 5 January 2001, when the Myanmar Army was reestablishing an outpost at O-7 Hillock near Tachilek, a group of Thai troops led by Captain Yohtin of the 138th Cavalry Battalion came to the hill and demanded that the Myanmar troops withdraw. The hillock was not removed by the Myanmar Army as it was Myanmar territory. However, Myanmar refused fully to comply with this demand. Historically, O-7 Hillock served as a camp for KMT forces before being reclaimed by the Myanmar Army in 1961. When the KMT units encroached en masse into Myanmar territory, the Myanmar Army raised the national flag after launching the Yangyi Aung Operation to recapture the hillock with a lot of blood and sweat. Thus, O-7 Hillock became an important point of contention between Thailand and Myanmar. In response, the Thai Army, in collaboration with SURA, launched an offensive against Myanmar troops stationed at O-7 Hillock. Among the items seized by the Myanmar military after the confrontation were Thai military communication devices and a gas mask, providing evidence of Thai involvement in the conflict.¹ This incident underscores the ongoing tensions between Myanmar and Thailand, as the historical significance of O-7 Hillock continues to fuel conflict and highlight external involvement in territorial disputes.

The Myanmar military began a regular offensive in February 2001. The operation targeted newly constructed SURA outposts on the Myanmar-Thai border. South-west of Tachileik and on the border line of the north of Maheintet in Thailand, within the region of Kyathina region (estimate U-59864), Lwekhanchon region (estimate U-673601) and Lwemahsoak region (estimate U-501642), under the leadership of Ywet Sit about 150 armed drug smugglers from the Myanmar side came and built nine new camps along the border with the help of the Thai military. Then, they invaded the O-7 hillock as well. Hill O-7 overlooks Tachilek and surrounding villages.² During the attack, the Myanmar military captured a SURA camp on 9 February 2001, and also captured an associated Thai military outpost. When General Thein Sein, the Commander of the Triangle Military Command, met with the Commander of the Chin Rai (District) Military Command, he stated that the Myanmar Army had only attacked the SURA camps and had no intention of invading Thai territory. Myanmar forces were delayed in withdrawing from the hill (Thai Camp) due to the Thai army's artillery attack. The matter was not resolved diplomatically and was reported to the Thai media, the situation made worse. On 11 February 2001, the Thai Army allowed the SURA to use Aung Zeya Hill to attack the Myanmar military outposts at O-7 Hillock with artillery. SURA's firing resulted in 48 shells hitting O-7 Hillock in Tachilek town and another 10 shells landed in Tachileik town and the Myanmar Army returned fire. As a result, a few bullets fell in Mae Sai, killing and injuring some Thai citizens. Three civilians were killed and 15 were injured by the bullets that fell in Tachileik. The Thai Foreign Ministry protested the incident and accused the Myanmar government of showing complete disregard for the lives and safety of innocent civilians. The Thai government has been completely silent on the deaths of Myanmar civilians as a result of the SURA artillery attack. The Thai government accused the Burmese army of firing into Thai territory. The Myanmar government denied the allegation.³ This rise in military conflict shows the complicated issues of

¹ မြန်မာ့အလင်းသတင်းစာ (Myanma Alin Newspaper), 4 March 2001, pp.9,16

² Watching For Long Didn't Say, pp.4-5

³ ကြေးမုံသတင်းစာ (Kyemon Newspaper), 13 February 2001, pp.12-13

land disputes, outside influences, and the tragic effects on ordinary people, highlighting the urgent need for a peaceful solution in the Myanmar-Thai border area.

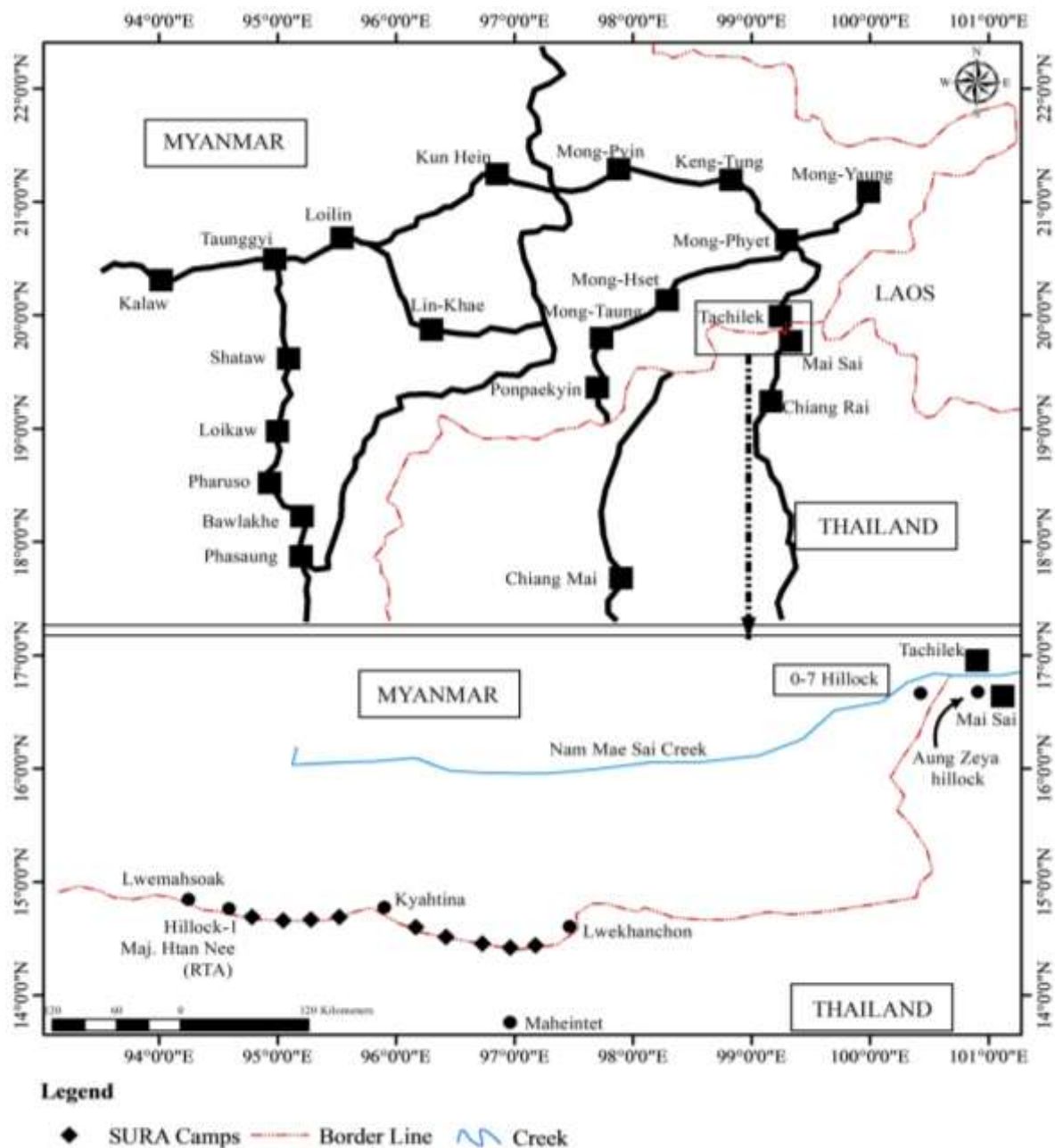


Figure 3. Map of Clash sites between Myanmar Armed Forces and the Royal Thai Army¹

Taking advantage of the attack, the Thai government's military and media accused the Myanmar government of protecting the drug trade and launched counter-insurgency operations into battles. A simple counter-insurgency operation turned into an ugly border conflict. At the same time, both countries have sent reinforcements to the area and media criticism from both countries has raised tensions. At a press conference held by the Myanmar government on 12

¹ Neither Friend Nor Foe, p.118

February 2001, the government spokesman stated that the Thai military not only assisted SURA in their attack on O-7 Hillock but also fired heavy weapons into Tachileik. The Thai military unit, putting the SURA to the front attacked the Myanmar military.¹ SURA continued to attack Myanmar outposts from inside Thailand, making full use of shelters provided by the Thai Army. The negative comments on the Myanmar government and military were made by the Thai government and Lt. General Watanachai Chaimuenwong. Finally, a joint statement was issued at the TBC meeting on 26 February 2001.

Following the battle Thai No.3 Military Commander Lt. General Watanachai Chaimuenwong closed the border gates between Thailand and Myanmar without reporting to the Thai government. This action halted the exports of essential goods such as rice, medicine, and fuel to Myanmar. Border close quietly led to protests who Thai traders and civilians demonstrating in front of the Mae Sai Police Station on 8 March 2001, as the blockade negatively impacted cross-border trade. Under mounting pressure from affected traders, Lt. General Watanachai Chaimuenwong announced on 12 March 2001 that border gates would be reopened, once again without consultation with the Thai government. Due to the lack of formal coordination with the Myanmar side regarding this issue, tensions arose when the Myanmar side did not reopen the site.² Therefore, after diplomatic negotiations on the part of the Thai government, the 18th Regional Border Committee (RBC) meeting was able to be held on 3 April 2001 in Keng Tung. The meeting was attended by Lt. General Watanachai Chaimuenwong from the Thai side and Lt. General Thein Sein, Commander of the Triangle Regional Military Command from the Myanmar side. In the meeting, they discussed drug elimination, the border process and readmission of illegal entrants, and the promotion of tourism. However, the Thai Army again participated in the attack by SURA on the Myanmar Army's Pachee camp (T-905114) on 21 April 2001. During the attack, the Myanmar Army had only twenty-one soldiers who faced approximately 200 joint forces of SURA and the Thai Army. As a result, the Myanmar Army was forced to retreat. SURA claimed to have found methamphetamines at the camp and presented them to the Thai media, accusing the Myanmar Army of drug use. Additionally, relations between the two countries became strained as the Thai media published insulting reports about Myanmar. On 23 April 2001, SURA's team again attacked the Myanmar military camp at the Myanmar-Thai border point BP.1 but the Myanmar Army was able to fight back. Pachee Camp was recaptured by the Myanmar Army on 3 May 2001.³ These events show how weak the relationship between Myanmar and Thailand is, as decisions made by military leaders and ongoing violence disrupt important trade and cooperation while increasing tensions, stressing the need for better diplomatic efforts to bring stability back to the border area.

Conclusion

After the independence of Myanmar, it maintained a neutral policy and has not caused any problems with neighboring countries for more than 50 years. Negotiations with China, Laos, India, and Bangladesh successfully defined the borders of the two countries. Myanmar-Thai border issues also began with an inaccurate boundary issue. However, Thailand's successive

¹ ကြေးမုံသတင်းစာ (Kyemon Newspaper), 13 February 2001, pp.12-13

² မြန်မာ့အလင်းသတင်းစာ (Myanma Alin Newspaper), 15 March 2001, p.8

³ Ibid, 26 April 2001, pp.8,16

governments took advantage of the presence of armed insurgents on the Myanmar-Thai border and were unable properly to control the border area, and supported the KMT who invaded Myanmar to fix the border set by the former British colonial government and Thailand. As armed insurgents in Myanmar have made peace, there is no buffer zone in the border area, and more support has been provided to the remaining insurgents to avoid a potential clash between the two countries' forces. Armed insurgents who violate Myanmar's sovereignty and law, SURA also supported in one way or another. During the period of the Myanmar military government, the border problems between Myanmar and Thailand began to arise when Myanmar continued to practice independent and active foreign policy, had friendly relations with neighboring countries, and dominated the border region. However, although the Myanmar government negotiated and resolved the border delimitation issue with the Thai government, it has not yet been completed and is still being worked on.

In early 2001, Myanmar-Thailand relations were strained when SURA and the Thai military joined forces to carry out attacks in the border region between the two countries. Starting from the Loi Lan area, the Thai military launched an attack on O-7 Hillock and Pachee Camp in collaboration with the armed insurgent's SURA. As a result, tensions between the two countries escalated into armed conflict. These tensions have led to the write of books, articles, and newspapers between the two countries that have fostered a spirit of patriotism. Territorial disputes will continue to exist between the two countries until a precise border can be established. In early 2001, tensions and fighting along the Myanmar-Thai border significantly diminished Myanmar-Thailand relations. But both government tried to negotiate mutual respect and trust over the territorial disputes.

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