

Nine hurt as Cambodian monk protest turns ugly

Reuters

Monday, December 17, 2007; 3:31 AM

PHNOM PENH (Reuters) - Three Cambodian Buddhist monks and six riot police were hurt on Monday in a fight that broke out when the monks tried to deliver a protest letter to the Vietnamese embassy in Phnom Penh, officials and witnesses said.

About 40 saffron-robed monks were trying to demand Vietnam stop persecuting Buddhists. When their path was blocked, they started throwing bottles and hitting the 100 riot police positioned near the embassy compound.

The riot police, who were not armed, chased the monks away with electric batons.

One of the marchers, 20-year-old Thach Many, accused police of overreacting. "We just wanted to deliver a protest petition," he told Reuters.

The petition urged Vietnam to free a jailed Cambodian monk called Tim Sakhorn, release five others disrobed by Hanoi early this year and respect the religious rights of the ethnic Cambodian minority in Vietnam's Mekong delta area.

Tim Sakhorn, 39, was defrocked in June and sentenced to a year in jail in Vietnam on charges of upsetting Cambodia-Vietnam relations.

Police accused the monks of staging an illegal and violent protest.

"Monks hid stones in their bags and hit police, injuring them in the arms and legs," said police chief Touch Naroeth.

Nobody at the Vietnamese embassy was immediately available for comment.

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