PHNOM PENH, Cambodia -- A Cambodian official claimed Tuesday that about 40 Thai troops crossed into Cambodia's territory as tensions mounted in a dispute over land near an ancient border temple. The Thai military denied any incursion.

Thai military officials said troops had simply deployed near the disputed area "to protect our sovereignty."

Hang Soth, director-general of the national authority for Preah Vihear temple, said the Thai troops entered Cambodia near Preah Vihear, center of a long-standing quarrel between the neighbors that escalated when it was recently declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

"Confrontation is occurring between Thai troops and our Cambodian troops, but there is no shooting yet," Hang Soth said. "Our troops have been ordered to be on alert but not to fire first."

Major. Gen. Kanok Netakawesana, the regional Thai army commander, said in a telephone interview that his troops were on Thai soil close to the disputed area. He declined to give the number of soldiers deployed.

"We are not violating the territory of Cambodia. We have every right to deploy troops here to protect our sovereignty," Kanok said.

The movement of Thai troops followed the arrest by Cambodia of three Thai citizens for crossing the border earlier Tuesday.

The incident marked the first cross-border foray by Thai protesters since Cambodia shut off access to Preah Vihear temple to visitors from Thailand late last month.

Preah Vihear was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site a week ago despite objection from Thai groups. The two countries have a long-standing dispute over the land that surrounds the temple, and Thai activists have recently revived nationalist sentiment over the issue.

Hang Soth said a Thai Buddhist monk, a woman and a man apparently managed to evade a checkpoint on the Thai side and crossed through a jungle border into Cambodia earlier Tuesday.

He said they were immediately stopped by guards, and that Cambodian authorities were ready to hand the protesters back to Thailand, "so I don't understand why Thai troops still had to enter Cambodia. They want to provoke us."

In 1962, the International Court of Justice awarded the temple and the land it occupies to...
Cambodia, a decision that still rankles many Thais even though the temple is culturally Cambodian, sharing the Hindu-influenced style of the more famous Angkor complex in northwestern Cambodia.

Cambodia's recent move to secure the temple's world landmark status has angered political leaders in Thailand and sparked small protests by some Thais who feared it would jeopardize their country's claims to disputed land adjacent to the site.

Some Thais have been protesting the listing and demanding the eviction of Cambodians living on land near the temple. In response, Cambodia has sealed off access to the temple from Thailand since June 22.