

Borderline classrooms: education at risk in Southeast Asia

by Sokhuon In

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The opening ceremony for the new academic year 2025- 26 at Wat Reach Bor Primary School, Siem Reap Province, Cambodia

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Armed clashes along the Cambodia–Thailand border in late July 2025 showed once more how fragile peace is in Southeast Asia. According to the NGO [Save the Children](#), over 1,200 schools in both countries, including Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear and Surin provinces, were closed because artillery fire and the fighting forced 134,000 people to leave their homes in Cambodia. The violence resulted in the deaths of civilians, halted essential services and significantly disrupted education.

In addition to damaging classrooms and causing exam disruptions, Cambodian students in Thailand faced harassment as a result of the conflict. Many individuals were compelled to return home against their wishes, abandoning their studies. Disputes over the Cambodia–Thailand border have been ongoing for decades, resulting in educational opportunities being stripped away from an entire generation, highlighting the exacerbation of inequality by conflict.

The disruption got worse because of the displacement. Over 50,000 Cambodians, including [6,500 children](#), moved to camps as a result of the conflict. [UNICEF](#) and [World Vision](#) set up temporary classrooms and support, but most missed weeks of school, increasing dropout risk.

According to the [Cambodian Ministry of Education](#), the closure of 605 schools in five provinces affected 15,000 students and over 6,000 teachers. The national high school exams that were supposed to happen in mid-August were put off for safety reasons. Authorities in Thailand closed [751 schools](#) near the border as a precautionary measure due to the conflict. These closures were precautionary, but they showed how scared the community was.

The risks for Cambodian students in Thailand went beyond just feeling unsafe. Reports of anti-Cambodian speech spread [online](#) and in local communities, leading to harassment and exclusion. By August, at least [600 Cambodian](#) students had

gone back home, saying that discrimination was their main concern.

Rights monitors reported that a **Cambodian teenager** in Thailand took her own life after facing isolation from her peers, who associated her personal situation with the border conflict. In another case, Thai police arrested and planned to deport a 13-year-old **Cambodian boy** while he was at school, which child rights groups condemned. One student said they felt “**trapped between borders**” because they couldn’t go to school in Thailand and didn’t know if their credits would be accepted back home.

This hostility undermines the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)’s **cross-border education** exchanges.

The conflict showed once more how weak ASEAN is at resolving disputes. The **High Council** of the organisation, which is mandated to assist in conflict resolution as per **the Charter**, remains inactive in addressing the ongoing disputes. The fighting in late July stopped only after Malaysia helped arrange a **ceasefire**, which was backed by outside powers like the US and China. But the real problems that cause the flare-ups to happen over and over again are still not being dealt with.

Without regional protocols, students are left vulnerable and extended school closures result in lasting harm. The conflict shows how important it is to include education in security planning.

There should be “Education-Safe Zones” along the border to protect schools. The zones should be set up along the border as safe places where schools, teachers and students are safe from violence and political interference. The Schools as Zones of Peace (SZOP) programs in **Afghanistan**, **Nepal**, and **Somalia** are good examples of how to build strong community ownership and get local actors to promise to respect schools as safe, non-military spaces. These experiences demonstrate that when education is utilised as a peacebuilding instrument, it not only preserves learning amid conflict but also promotes reconciliation and trust within fragmented communities.

To ensure continuity of learning within these zones, governments and partners should deploy mobile classrooms, hybrid teaching models and cross-border credit recognition systems. The **European Erasmus** framework, through its *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)* and **blended learning programs**, shows that regional cooperation can keep educational mobility going even in times of crisis. Some examples are Digicel’s **solar classrooms** in Haiti, Peru’s mobile “**Amazon vans**” and Indigenous tech programs, India’s **EduBridge app**, Kenya’s solar “**Classroom in a Box**”, and modular schools in **Florida** and **California**. These

models show how education that is modular, mobile and uses technology can keep people learning during times of crisis or change.

Finally, to stop educational disruption and protect students from discrimination and abuse, bilateral and regional cooperation must put human rights accountability first. The [ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights](#) (AICHR) should ensure that everyone has the right to an education and that anti-discrimination rules are followed. Integrating education protection into human rights discussions will turn political promises into enforceable protections. This will create a regional framework where schools are safe, welcoming and rights-based institutions even when there is conflict.

In this context, [Save the Children](#) and other humanitarian organisations have been advocating for increased investment in mobile learning units, teacher training for emergency response and digital learning platforms to sustain education during crises. Their efforts support AICHR's mission by connecting the protection of human rights with practical ways to make sure that education continues and people are strong during emergencies.

As of early November 2025, the ceasefire between Cambodia and Thailand remains in effect, while displaying signs of notable fragility and uncertainty. For thousands of students whose learning has been interrupted, the emotional scars may last much longer than the immediate effects of the conflict. Each missed test and each forced return contradicts [ASEAN's vision](#) of a collective future founded on integration and human capital.

In Southeast Asia's border flashpoints, school safety is non-negotiable: ignore it and you sabotage youth potential and the possibility of lasting peace.

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