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Traders hit hard by battle for Burma pass

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Three Pagoda Pass — Several hundred Thai traders and their families have been hit hard by the closure of this black market town two months ago amid fighting between Karen and Mon minority groups.

Many of the families have been forced to evacuate their homes in the Kanchanaburi district of Sangkhla after the minority rebels began fighting for control of the lucrative trading post.

"We want the market opened so we can go back to our shophouses and trade," said businessman Pook Selanond.

While an uneasy truce is now in place, Thai territory opposite the pass has been declared off-limits by security officials. Traders cannot pass the military checkpoint at Songkaria village, 18 km inside Thailand, because the 20 sq km area that juts into Burma is littered with landmines.

Mr Pook, who has been living with other traders in makeshift shelters since the fighting started, says he has lost goods worth more than 80,000 baht.

The Karen and Mon, who formerly shared in the border trade became engaged in heavy fighting when their territorial dispute could not be resolved.

More than 60 rebels and civilians on both sides were killed, and more than 100 injured, while hundreds have fled to Sangkhla Buri district.

The fighting damaged most Thai houses and government offices, including the Border Patrol Police camps near the black market town.

Trader Dumrong Pungbangkadee, who supplies several million baht worth of goods, said the market is "like a cesspool" and villages in a 30 km radius

are deserted. Goods worth several hundred million baht move through the

pass each year, with the Mon collecting a five per cent tax and the Karen seven per cent.

Another trader, Prem Thongyothin, said he earned 8,000 to 10,000 baht a month selling goods to smugglers from Burma who wanted essentials such as seasoning powder, slippers, bicycles, textiles and medicine.

In its heyday, hundreds of ox carts from Burma with several hundred traders visited the market weekly.

Mr Prem said: "Many border traders have had to shift to other trading channels as a result of the problem."

Mr Dumrong, who is also deputy chief of the Sangkhla Buri district defence volunteers, said the traders were not interested in politics but wanted the Mon and Karen to settle their differences.

According to Dr Tu Ja Manam, secretary for foreign affairs of the National Democratic Front, in which 10 rebel groups are members, said the problem would be settled soon.

A ceasefire has been agreed upon and the groups will withdraw their troops 2 km from their current positions and avoid confrontation.

Thai security officers have asked the groups to stay 7 km from the border, and defuse the landmines they planted.

Brig Saw Yu Paw, the Karen commander responsible for the pass area, said he has been assigned by Karen National Union president Gen Bo Mya to maintain peace on the Burmese side of the pass.

The Karens claim the area belongs to them and not the Mon.

New Mon State Party vice president Nai Nonla and Mon National Liberation Army commander Nai Toe Mon said they want to live in peace with the Karen.

Negotiations will be held soon between the two sides said. Nai Nonla said the talks are scheduled for the end of this month.