Sann Vanny is selling chicken meats in March 2020 at Chrang Chamres market in Phnom Penh’s Russey Keo district. She is worried about increased online hate comments against her community amid the COVID-19 outbreak. (Ananth Baliga/VOA Khmer)

The revelation of the religious identity of infected individuals set off a deluge of online hate directed at the minority community.

PHNOM PENH — Saros Abdullah was furious last Wednesday. Seated in a narrow lane at Phnom Penh’s Phsar Tuol Sangke, the Cambodian Muslim chicken seller was seething at the comments she was reading on Facebook about her community causing the spread of coronavirus in Cambodia. “Some Khmer brothers and sisters said these Muslims brought the virus into Cambodia,” she said, her voice steadily rising in volume.

“I got very upset and that led to a clash of words with other people here.”
Last week, the Ministry of Health, over three days, reported several Cambodians, from the religious minority, had returned from a gathering in Malaysia and tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

However, while the ministry had refrained from revealing the religious identities of other people who had the respiratory disease, officials revealed that of the 79 Cambodian Muslims who traveled to Malaysia, around 26 of them had the virus.

As of Monday afternoon, Cambodia had reported 86 positive cases of COVID-19. The most recent spike was attributed to a group of 31 French tourists who tested positive over the weekend in the port-resort town of Sihanoukville.

The revelation of the religious identity of infected individuals set off a deluge of online hate directed at the minority community.

“I got angry and I criticized those who said it,” Saros Abdullah said, in her home market in the capital's Russey Keo district, some seven kilometers north of the city center. “They are confused that I insult Khmer people but I didn’t mean to. That led to a verbal confrontation in this market.”

The 49-year-old chicken seller is referring to Horm Sreymom, who sits six feet away from Saros Abdullah and also sells chickens.

“She is very reckless,” Horm Sreymom said, pointing directly at Saros Abdullah. “When she said ‘these Khmer’ I got so furious that I had to respond.”

Then ensued an argument that reverberated across the market, and beyond. “I heard they were fighting about Chams,” said one vendor, referring to ethnic Cham minority groups, who also practice Islam.

Horm Sreymom denies verbally targeting the Muslim community in the argument. She said she only wanted to make the point that Saros Abdullah was generalizing about all “Khmers,” referring to the Cambodian Buddhist majority.

“We live in a Khmer country. Do no insult Khmer people,” was Horm Sreymom’s retort to Saros Abdullah.
The Ministry of Health, in a Facebook post, reported on March 15 that two “Khmer Islam” had tested positive for the viral disease. The same social media post announced that a French man and his toddler tested positive, yet their religious identities were not mentioned.

That Facebook post received around 250 comments but a March 16 statement announcing around 19 new cases linked to the Malaysia gathering, had some 1,100 comments.

Many of these social media comments were targeted at the Muslim community in Cambodia, with Facebook users blaming the community for the spread of the disease in the country.

“They should be locked in their homes,” read one post last week. “Why are you foolish and ignorant bringing in trouble for other people,” read another post.

A number of these comments were just the word “Cham” written in Khmer, even though not all Cambodian Muslims belong to the ethnic Cham minority.

“Those people say they fear God more than COVID,” read another post from Friday. “But when they get infected, they accuse Khmer of discrimination.”

On Wednesday, March 17, government spokesperson Phay Siphan asked the media to refrain from using identifying information for those who tested positive, even though it was the Ministry of Health that had released this information.

“We are facing the COVID-19 problem why should we create more problems in our communities,” Phay Siphan said at a press conference last Wednesday.

“Please, members of the press, understand and make adjustments in your choice of words to avert discrimination.”

However, he did not acknowledge whether the ministry was mistaken for releasing sensitive information.

Othsman Hassan, a senior minister and one of the few political leaders for the Cambodian Muslim community, also downplayed the inappropriate language used against the community, instead of blaming a group of unnamed “opportunists.”
“But we have to be careful of the opportunists who aim to polarize our internal solidarity within the nation – cracking and breaking our solidarity – for them to gain benefits for any of their purpose,” he said, in a press conference on Saturday.

In Chrang Chamreh market, north of Phsar Tuol Sangke, another meat seller, Sann Vanny, has seen a drop in chicken sales. She feels it is likely regular customers are staying away from her business because of her religion, but cannot be sure of that.

“Whether they do not dare to come out of their homes or whether this is a form of discrimination against us, I dare not conclude,” she told visiting reporters.

Like other community members, Sann Vanny was upset at the tone of comments against Cambodian Muslims, both online and in the neighborhood.

“You see they speak this kind of language – ‘they are like that; that is why they don’t have a country to stay in,’” the chicken vendor said, referring to a Facebook comment she had read. “Is this acceptable?”

Vanny said she was concerned that younger, “hotheaded” members of her community would reach a breaking point, and intense verbal exchanges could escalate a conflict rapidly.

A hundred meters down the street, Mann Pitri is walking around the market, selling sugarcane juice. The 38-year-old vendor said he had what may be seen as a small incident but one that was unpleasant for him as a Cambodian Muslim.

Last Friday, a Cambodian woman with two children was riding on a motorcycle when one of the children asked for a glass of sugarcane juice, said Mann Pitri. The woman responded that the left market vendor shook.

“She said ‘do not buy from the Chams’,” he said, adding that he had never heard someone say that to him before.

Chak Sopheap, executive director at the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said it was “dangerous” to identify COVID-19 patients by religion, adding that it places a heavier burden on minority communities, especially the Muslims in Cambodia, who largely live in peace and are well integrated
Muslims make up less than two percent of Cambodia's population.

Additionally, the decision to publish their religious identities was irrelevant and it impinged on their right to privacy, Chak Sopheap said.

“It is essential that the right to privacy of patients is maintained, and that sensitive and superfluous personal information, such as religion, that is not in the public interest, is withheld,” Chak Sopheap said in an email.

Across the Tonle Sap, on the capital's Chroy Changvar peninsula, word of Saros Abdullah’s quarrel with Horm Sreymom at Tuol Sangke market has reached the small Muslim community centered around the Muk Dac Mosque.

There is a sense of tension in the community. The mosque was closed for Friday prayers and community members were reluctant to speak to VOA Khmer reporters about the backlash against Cambodian Muslims.

After some hesitancy, a few, younger members of the community began to express their concerns at online comments targeting them. Several of them were flabbergasted at how people are targeting Islam, rather than questioning the actions of individuals.

“This is now very chaotic and we feel very fearful,” said one man. Another woman called the discrimination unfortunate because members of the community were suffering as “victims” of the virus.

The group then started talking over each other, making it hard to understand what they were saying, though it was clear they were irate, and hopeless at the same time.

“I suggest that all religions are the same. We live in the same country,” said 34-year-old Math. “We should unite as one in the country. Just stop the discrimination, brothers.”

Details: https://www.voacambodia.com/a/linked-to-viral-outbreak-cambodian-muslims-facing-backlash/5341035.html