Bridge Inquiry Aims To Find What Government ‘Missed’

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The head of the organization, Ou Virak, told “Hello VOA” on Thursday that interviews with nearly 50 witnesses showed too few police were stationed near the bridge.

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights is continuing its investigation of the Nov. 22 Diamond Bridge catastrophe, but it lacks the authority to summon government officials and police for questioning.

The head of the organization, Ou Virak, told
“Hello VOA” on Thursday that interviews with nearly 50 witnesses showed too few police were stationed near the bridge.

The center is holding its own investigation into the disaster, which killed 353 people, after the government’s official report was concluded in under a week and found no fault with Water Festival organizers, city planners or security officials.

“In our view, the government report missed a lot of angles,” Ou Virak said. “That’s why CCHR is trying to seek information through other aspects of the situation, including watching videos and interviewing victims and witnesses.”

The organization was following more leads and had “found much more than the government when it ended its investigation,” he said. “But we don’t have the authority to summon anyone for questioning like the government.”

Like the government report, CCHR found witnesses who said the main cause of the deadly stampede came when people began shouting that the swaying bridge would collapse. But it also found there had been “no
preparation” for such a crowded bridge and that police were not stationed near the choke point.

The group also found reports that electric shocks went through the crowd, he said, a claim it is continuing to investigate.

Witnesses said the police had done little on the mainland side of the bridge to keep the crowd from amassing on the bridge, as a concert got underway on Diamond Island, on the other side. Witnesses also said a barricade for vehicles had become a source of congestion for foot traffic.

Overall, Ou Virak said, the disaster showed an “absence of good governance,” where officials have not taken responsibility for the incident, and where underpaid police were not at their stations.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, officials had blamed the incident on the crowd, saying that uneducated people “from the countryside” had panicked. Ou Virak called this “irresponsible.” Meanwhile, the National Assembly did not step forward in its own inquiry, he said.

Ou Virak was also critical of the response to the
stampede, where, he said, police stacked the injured with the dead, creating more fatalities.

“The response of the police was much lacking,” he said, “and the police were not prepared or trained properly to understand early rescue.”

Tun Srey Pov, who survived the bridge incident and also spoke on “Hello VOA” Thursday, said there were not enough police to contain a situation that rapidly got out of hand.

“If they had had enough security or enough control, there would not have been a deadly stampede that caused more than 300 people to be killed,” she said. “I want to know for sure.”

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