Group Finds Chaos, Violence Led to Bridge Tragedy

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Stampede victims are seen rescued by police officers and fellow bystanders. The Diamond Bridge tragedy killed 353 people and injured nearly 400.

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights says it has found a climate of chaos leading up to the Nov. 22 bridge stampede as it continues an independent investigation.

Officials for the group told VOA Khmer that initial interviews have led to testimony of electrocutions on the overcrowded bridge, which
was festively lit that night, as well as fist fights between youth gangs ahead of a panic that ultimately left 353 people dead and nearly 400 wounded.

Although CCHR has not yet issued a report, its early discoveries, which the group shared in part with VOA Khmer, are likely to stir more public debate for the way the Water Festival security was handled by public officials in the lead-up to the stampede.

The government has said the incident was an unforeseeable accident and that no one will be punished.

Ou Virak, director of the Center for Human Rights, said the center’s investigation had also learned that military police had stolen the possessions of the victims, following interviews with more than 40 witnesses and survivors.

He called the government investigative committee lacking and hastily done.

“That investigation was only symbolic, because they knew in advance their answer to the cause,” he said. “In general, an investigation must not be concluded in one week. It needs detail.”

Ou Virak said the center would need up to six
month to complete the report on the bridge stampede, which was the worst Cambodian disaster in decades. The report will then be sent to the administration and the National Assembly, he said.

Chan Saveth, chief of investigation for the rights group Adhoc, said the government’s answer to the disaster was “not enough and not credible.”

The National Assembly denied a request by the opposition Sam Rainsy Party for an independent parliamentary investigation.

SRP lawmaker Son Chhay said his party was considering an investigation of its own nevertheless.

In many countries, he said, those thought responsible for such disasters removed themselves from their posts, to allow investigation. “In our country, the responsible persons conduct the investigation by themselves, and there is no result.”

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