Police inspect the underside of the northern bridge to Diamond Island following a deadly stampede on November 22. A string of broken lights are visible in the lower left quarter of the photograph. Diamond Island’s now infamous northern bridge reopened on Wednesday, 10 days after the government declared the case into how and why the water festival stampede left hundreds dead and injured closed.

National Assembly President Heng Samrin rejected an appeal by opposition lawmakers earlier this week to open an independent investigation into the tragedy, as the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights announced its own inquiry into the deadly accident.

Lingering questions remain, however, about what role, if any, electric shocks played in the stampede.

Numerous survivors of the stampede say they received shocks from the wiring of lights lining the bridge.

Srey Loeung, who survived the tragedy, said she supported further investigations into the issue “for finding the true reason for the unexpected tragedy of the stampede”.
“I still believe that some injured and dead people suffered electric shocks from the bridge railing, where some electrical lines were cut,” she said.

“My husband was also shocked from the bridge railing, but he immediately took his hand away, while my younger sister-in-law died as a result of electric shock,” Srey Loeung said, adding that her sister-in-law, Sum Chan Phoeun, 24, fell unconscious after being shocked and was trampled to death.

Srey Loeung and her husband escaped, like many others, by climbing over the railing and jumping into the river below.

During the early hours of medical response, a doctor at Calmette hospital told The Post that the two main causes of death among the bodies he had examined were suffocation and electrocution. That has since become an anomalous official assessment.

Hospital officials and the government have since said there is no evidence to support such claims.

“There is not any sign to prove that the victims suffered from electrocution,” said Minister of Health Mam Bunheng, who headed the sub-committee responsible for examining victims of the stampede for the government's inquiry.

Chhouy Meng, head of the emergency care unit and vice chief of the technical office at Calmette Hospital in Phnom Penh, said he saw no signs of electrocution.

“Maybe some people who tried to jump over the bridge into the water touched the electric wire … but it’s not the cause of death or injury”, he said.

The government did not perform autopsies for its report.
Paul Hurford, an Australian firefighter who has been assisting with emergency response in Cambodia for more than four years and was on the scene within hours, said it would be difficult to prove that anyone was electrocuted.

“Without real physical surface burns, and without autopsies that they didn’t do, there’s no real way of proving electrocutions,” he said.

Galena Nicola, a doctor at Phnom Penh’s Naga Clinic, said the impact of an electric shock depends on a number of variables.

Touching an electric source with both hands can stop the heart, Nicola said, whereas it is easier to stop a current if someone is standing on the ground.

“If you use water, like I heard the water cannon was used, it increases everything,” Nicola said.

Numerous people reported that police used a water hose to cool down the crowd, but Hurford said the crowd had requested it.

“I do know from a source that water was used by the fire brigade to cool the crowd, primarily for that, and it was done at the request of the people.”

Some survivors reported minor shocks from touching the wiring on the bridge railing. Nao Vannak, 17, from Kandal province, said he survived by leaping into the water.

“But when I jumped down I touched the bridge and was electrocuted [shocked] a little bit.”
Phat Navy, 38 from Prey Veng province, said she had lost two high school-aged nieces, Thuc Srey Roth and San Srey Neang, in the incident.

“People said they got unconscious after fainting in the crowd and we didn’t know if they suffered electric shock or not, but I think they probably got shocked in addition to fainting because they turned off the bridge’s lights sometime after 10pm,” she said.

The government has concluded that the stampede was caused by the swaying of the suspension bridge, which sparked a panic among the crowd.

Ou Virak, president of the CCHR, said it would be “very difficult” to get to the bottom of such questions.

“Of course, it would be great if the companies and authorities would cooperate and allow us to have access”, he said.

But Ou Virak said he wanted to find out more about electric shocks.

“Maybe [the shocks were] just enough to slow people down, to numb people, and that could be even worse – people don’t know what’s going on,” he said.

“I hope the government will continue the investigation” Ou Virak said. “I don’t think an investigation of one week is enough.” ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY CHRANN CHAMROEUN AND CHEANG SOKHA