

# Lessons learnt from Cambodia's bridge stampede tragedy

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As Cambodia begins to celebrate its annual Water Festival, the country will also remember the victims of a bridge stampede that killed more than 350 people.

Cambodia's Prime Minister described it as the second biggest tragedy since the Khmer Rouge regime, but a new investigation says the deaths could have been avoided.

*Presenter: Liam Cochrane*

*Speakers: Srey Pov, Cambodian bridge stampede survivor; Phay Siphon, Cambodian government spokesman; Oeun Narin, former investigator with the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights; Kep Chuktema, Phnom Penh governor.*

COCHRANE: Nineteen-year-old Srey Pov remembers the day almost a year ago when she was caught in the Koh Pich bridge stampede.

POV: (translation): I saw the people falling on each other and passing out. Some people were still alive, but others trampled over them and they died.

COCHRANE: Srey Pov survived, but her older sister, 24-year-old Som Chantoeun was killed, leaving behind two young children.

Each year, millions of rural Cambodians come to the capital to watch the annual boat races, see outdoor concerts and stroll up and down the riverside. It's always crowded, but last year, things went horribly wrong when a new bridge meant for one-way foot traffic became packed with jostling crowds trying to move in both directions.

Cambodian government spokesman, Phay Siphon explained what happened next.

PHAY SIPHAN: The panicked, ran for their lives, they cannot withdraw their direction and very soon they have no choice, they have to go again with traffic from another side. So the people get killed over here.

COCHRANE: Most of those killed were young and many were young women celebrating a break from working in Cambodia's garment factories.

It's claimed water sprayed onto the trapped crowd led to people being electrocuted from the lights strung across the bridge.

A government investigation after the event dismissed reports of electrocution and absolved the government of any responsibility.

The Cambodian Centre for Human Rights has spent months speaking to survivors and those who responded to the emergency.

Investigator Oeun Narin said the stampede on the bridge could have been avoided.

OEUN NARIN: The one who has to be responsible for (word indistinct) issues is the government, because based on the interview with those victims and the victim families, they say that if, even if it was well

organised, even might not have happened and in fact, at that time, there were not enough police officers and security guards over there.

COCHRANE: Oeun Narin said doctors who treated victims believed some had been electrocuted and others suffered internal injuries from being pulled out of the crush.

But some lessons have been learnt.

This week, two more bridges were opened, to better handle traffic.

SFX: Monks chanting

COCHRANE: Monks blessed the new Twin Dragon Bridges and Phnom Penh governor, Kep Chuktema, said better planning is now in place for festivals.

KEP CHUKTEMA: For all the big event, we need, we must to be careful to manage the crowd.

COCHRANE: This year's water festival is expected to attract fewer Cambodians from the provinces. Floods have displaced thousands and the annual boat races have been cancelled.

Nonetheless, authorities say 5,000 police will man 77 checkpoints along the riverside to avoid another tragic stampede.

The government is putting the finishing touches on a memorial statue next to the bridge, which will be finished in time for the exact anniversary on the 22nd November.

But survivor, Srey Pov, has no desire to go anywhere near the bridge.

POV (translation): I don't want to go there. I learned by lesson. I just worry that it could happen again this year.

COCHRANE: Instead, Srey Pov will remember her sister with a simple Buddhist ceremony in her home.