

Hundreds die in Phnom Penh bridge stampede

By John Roberts
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The Cambodian government of Prime Minister Hun Sen declared November 25 a national day of mourning for the lives lost on Monday night when a panicked stampede took place among thousands of people crowded onto a narrow bridge in the capital Phnom Penh. The tragedy occurred during the annual Water Festival, which celebrates the end of the wet season.

As of November 24, Ith Samheng, chairman of the committee set up by the government to investigate the catastrophic event, declared that 456 people were confirmed dead—109 who lost their lives at the scene and 347 who died in Phnom Penh's overwhelmed public hospitals. Hundreds more were injured.

The 50-metre Diamond Gate suspension bridge is one of two bridges that connect the 100-hectare (250 acre) Koh Pich (Diamond) Island in the Bassac River to central Phnom Penh. The stampede on the bridge occurred as concerts were ending on both sides of the bridge. Survivors reported being trapped by surges of people pushing in both directions. Some reports state that the second bridge had been closed by organisers.

Paul Hurford, an Australian fire fighter who was working with the local emergency services, told the *Financial Times* that it took him at least 35 minutes to work his way through the crowd to get to the casualties. "It is fairly confronting to see 300-plus casualties in an area less than 100 metres square," he said. "We were working on the worst ones, those with faint pulses. We worked on five or six who were borderline and unfortunately lost them all."

Some survivors were trapped and unable to move their heads for an hour or more. Loeung, a woman from Svay Rieng province whose 24-year-old sister was crushed to death, told the *Phnom Penh Post* that she had been "stuck in the middle of the bridge among nearly 1,000 people for about two hours".

Some people sought to escape from the crush by jumping into the river, leading to a number drowning.

Most of the dead were young people who had come to the capital from Cambodia's rural areas for the festival. It appears the majority were women who found it more difficult to extract themselves from the pile of bodies, which were stacked four or five high in some places.

The government estimates that three million people crowded into the city for the Water Festival. The celebration centres on traditional boat races in the river, picnics, concerts and walking the river banks with families and friends. Government spokesman Phay Siphon estimated that there were one-and-a-half million people on the tiny Diamond Island when the disaster started.

There are conflicting reports about what caused the stampede. Some survivors said that a disturbance in the crowd by some men caused the panic. Others said that the push on the bridge began after some of the crowd fainted because of the heat.

A government report on the government-controlled Bayon television station blamed the panic on a slight swaying of the bridge. Some survivors, however, have claimed that it began when people were electrocuted when police used water cannons to either control or cool the crowd. Water allegedly made contact with exposed wiring from the festive lighting that covered the bridge. Government authorities have denied that anyone was electrocuted.

Hospitals have reported that most of the casualties died from asphyxiation, drowning or internal bleeding. Doctor Chhouy Meng of the Calmette Hospital's technical office told the *Phnom Penh Post* on Wednesday that there was no evidence of electrocution. Only autopsies could determine the exact cause of

death in some cases, he noted however, but no autopsies would be performed. Health services were so overwhelmed on the night of the tragedy that many of the dead were dealt with by ambulances in the field. Once bodies were identified by authorities, the government immediately released them to their families for burial. All of the corpses had been released by Wednesday.

Whatever the immediate cause of the disaster, it is clear that the national and city authorities were totally unprepared for any emergency. Given the scale of the Water Festival, the danger was always present. The *Wall Street Journal* noted that “many expatriates view the festival as a time to get out of Phnom Penh, which they say doesn’t have the infrastructure to handle such an influx of people”.

On Wednesday, as relatives began to demand an explanation for the loss of family members, Information Minister Khieu Kanharith admitted the government had not been prepared to deal with crowd control issues. “We were concerned about the possibilities of boats capsizing and pick-pocketing,” he said. “We did well, but we did not think about this kind of incident.”

The Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission has called for a more thorough investigation. Its statement declared that the Cambodian government was clearly unprepared for “any large-scale disaster” and that it had failed to “control and limit the damage.”

From the time of the disaster, both Prime Minister Hun Sen and Canadia Bank PLC, the financier of the private developers who own Diamond Island, have sought to placate public anger over the hundreds of deaths.

Hun Sen has promised \$1,250 to cover the funeral expenses for each of the families of those killed and \$250 for those injured.

Canadia Bank executive Charles Vann stated: “This can’t be blamed on anybody. This is an accident nobody expected.” As he toured the main hospital in Phnom Penh, Vann reportedly handed out cash payments of \$1,000 to relatives of the dead and \$200 to injured people. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Vann said more bridges linking the island with the city would be built in the future.

The developers, the Overseas Cambodian Investment

Corporation, are currently constructing a \$US300 million, 75-hectare building complex on the island, which includes housing, a convention centre and other facilities. A spokesman for the company, Susi Tan, insisted that the government was responsible for “public security”. Denying the owners of the island had any responsibility for the conditions that led to the tragedy, she claimed that while it had happened “near the Diamond Island”, it had not occurred “on the island”.

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