

Memory of deadly building collapse lingers for Sihanoukville workers

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Mam Thim, who survived a deadly building collapse in Sihanoukville last year, talks to journalists at a ceremony to mark one year since the tragedy, in Phnom Penh on June 22. Panha Chhorpoan



Workers gathered this week to mark the one year anniversary of a building collapse in Preah Sihanouk province that killed 28, and spoke of their fears of returning to construction work as the provincial court is set to begin hearings on June 25 to try four men for manslaughter in the case.



Marking one year since the disaster, Mam Thim, 54, recalled his experience in the early morning of June 22, 2019, at a ceremony in Phnom Penh's Sen Sok district earlier this week.



Thim said that when the seven-story building collapsed in the early morning, he did not think he would make it out alive.



"Fortunately, four other workers and I survived even though we were on the second floor of the building in the same room," Thim said at the event, organized by the Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia (BWTUC). "About ten minutes after the building collapsed, I crawled out of there debris and then the other four workers got out later," he said, adding that none of them were seriously injured.

Although he had received thousands of dollars worth of support from the government and Cambodian Red Cross, he was never compensated by the Chinese owner of the building. He said he and the other workers inside the collapsed building had received help from Prime Minister Hun Sen's legal team to file a complaint asking for \$20,000 compensation for each families of those who died or were injured in the incident.

Thim added that although he had worked in construction since he was 20, he was too afraid to return to work in high-rise buildings and now supported his large family by farming at his hometown in Kampot province.

"I'm still scared of tall construction sites because I'm concerned that it's dangerous," Thim said. "Now, I only do farm work."

Chap Pros, 40, was sleeping on the second floor in the same room as Thim that morning in 2019.

"At the time of the collapse, I didn't think I was still alive," he said, adding that he received minor injuries.

Like Thim, he has also turned to farming rather than risk his life again in construction.

"Please, I ask the court to help solve this case quickly because it has already been one year since it happened," Pros said.

The building collapse highlighted the lack of enforcement of construction codes amid Sihanoukville's growth in recent years, which has been largely supported by an influx of Chinese tourists visiting casinos and resorts in the seaside town.

Six people were charged in the days after the deadly incident, among them four Chinese nationals, who have been awaiting trial in provincial prison, and one Cambodian and one Vietnamese national, who are on the run and will be tried in absentia.

Two of the Chinese nationals, the building owner Chen Run and the construction supervisor Deng Xing Gui, have been charged with manslaughter and causing unintentional injury and damage, and the other four men were charged with similar offenses.

Preah Sihanouk Provincial Court Director Sok Kalyan said that the court would hold its first hearing in the trial this week.

"The court will try that case on June 25," Kalyan said, declining to provide further details.

Ky Tech, the chief of Hun Sen's legal team, said that his colleagues will join the hearing to defend the victims of the building collapse.

"This case is coming late because the lawyers of the defendants made excuses to ask the court to delay it," Tech said, adding that the court should not wait any longer.

BWTUC union President Sok Kin said that the workers who had been involved in the collapse deserved justice and called on the government to expand the National Social Security Fund to help keep construction workers safe.

“I request that the Land Management Ministry issue a declaration on safety and health for construction workers in Cambodia because we have seen the construction sector struggle with this,” Kin said, adding that the ministry should be thorough in its inspection of building sites to ensure standards are in place.

Khun Tharo, program manager of labor rights group Central, said construction unions have consistently called on the government to increase safety for the nation’s 260,000 construction workers.

He added that he hoped the hearings later this week would help bring closure to survivors of the the tragedy in Preah Sihanouk province.

“We hope this hearing will find justice for all of the victims,” Tharo said.

He said he that he welcomed the government’s decision in November last year to issue a law on construction but added that in order for the law to be effective, inspections must be carried out to hold employers accountable.

“We want to see laws enforced and work conditions improve, because this sector has a lot of potential for growth and is also very susceptible to suffering,” he said, referring to the way workers are often treated.

Employers must be held accountable by the courts he said, rather than settling outside of the court system as is common.

“I think the government must seek justice and push the court to find the suspects who are responsible for the crimes and force them to pay compensation to victims,” he said.

He added that since 2019, Central had counted more than 100 cases in which construction workers’ job sites had put them in serious danger.

In the immediate aftermath of the event, the government also set up a special commission to check whether ongoing construction projects around the nation possessed the proper permits. It is unclear whether this commission is still checking permits for new buildings.

In January, another building collapse in Kep killed 36 and left 23 injured. The owner was detained and sent to court but was later released on bail.

In the first half of 2020, the Land Management Ministry had reported 1,116 registered construction projects nationwide with a total investment capital of \$2.57 billion, compared with 1,099 projects and \$1.7 billion in investment in 2019, showing an increase in capital of 51.25 percent.

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