

Stall 'was dirty and poorly kept'

Health officer reported unhygienic scenario but owner defends practices

By **KIMBERLY SPYKERMAN**

BACTERIA originating from faeces on a chopping board was just one of the lapses found at the Rojak Geylang Serai stall.

The findings were revealed yesterday at the opening of a coroner's inquiry into the deaths of Madam Aminah Samijo, 57, and Madam Norani Kassim, 59, who had consumed rojak at the stall last April. More than 150 people became ill from eating at the stall of Mr Sheik Alauddin Mohideen, 70.

Taking the stand yesterday, senior public health officer Abdul Rahman Osman from the Ministry of Health, told the court that he and another officer had inspected the stall on April 4 last year after being alerted to an outbreak of food poisoning.

The officer painted a picture of a stall that was "poorly maintained, very dirty and stained", with food waste everywhere, utensils stacked haphazardly, and a cockroach infestation to boot. On seeing remnants of rojak gravy in a pot in a wash basin, he asked if gravy from the previous day had been sold to customers.

According to Mr Abdul Rahman, stall assistant Allaudin Mohamad Yasin, 30, who is also the owner's younger son, admitted that this was the case. Mr Allaudin denied this when he took the stand yesterday.

Speaking through an interpreter, the older Mr Alauddin insisted that he adhered to good hygiene practices, and also ensured the same of his four assistants, two of whom are his sons. He said the stall was washed daily, with water and bleach, and that leftover cooked food and gravy were thrown away and never sold to customers.

All his assistants were gloved when they handled food, and he claimed he had never received complaints before the incident.

But when asked by State Coroner Victor Yeo to explain how so many of his customers had come to suffer food poisoning, Mr Alauddin said: "I'm not able to explain. We did the preparations as we always have been doing."

When Mr Yeo said the photos submitted did not show a stall which looked like it was cleaned daily, Mr Alauddin's older son Alayuthen Maheen, 32, said another area officer had come by earlier that morning and told them to close as many people had taken ill after eating their rojak.

"We were still in the process of clearing and cleaning when the other officers came. Because of this problem, we did not completely wash the place," he added.

The brothers told the court that they



Mr Alauddin, the owner of the rojak stall in the case.

Courtroom drama

EMOTIONS flooded the courtroom yesterday when family members of the two victims came face-to-face for the first time since last April's food-poisoning incident.

"Why didn't he come to the hospital and the funeral? Why can't they at least say sorry and make us feel better?" asked Ms Hamidah Yatim, 40, Madam Norani's daughter, adding tearfully that Mr Sheik Alauddin Mohideen's actions lacked a "human touch".

In response, Mr Alauddin said in Tamil: "I was afraid that if I went personally, I might be assaulted. That was the only reason. I've already extended my apologies through the newspapers."

Earlier, he had told the court that he had been frightened by two people who had shown up at the stall that week blaming him for their relatives being in hospital after eating his Indian rojak.

Ms Hamidah said that while she understood her mother's death was also caused by other health complications, she felt that Mr Alauddin "need not be afraid to face the family, if he did not do anything wrong".

Madam Aminah's husband, Mr Omar Ali, 56, told the court that he wanted to seek compensation for his dead wife's hospital bills and for his children's education.

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were in charge of making the rojak gravy from scratch before the stall opened at 7am. They said uncooked food was always put in the refrigerator, and food was only placed in the display case after being fried.

Fellow stall assistant Mohamed Abdul Jappar Mohamed Maideen, who sliced the rojak items, could not account for the bacteria found on the chopping board. "When I go to the toilet, I use soap to wash my hands. After that, I wipe my hands before putting on the gloves," he said in Tamil.

The hearing continues on Thursday.

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