

# Probe extends to mee siam stall

BY APRIL CHONG & DIANA OTHMAN

INVESTIGATIONS into what may have led to Singapore's worst outbreak of food poisoning appears to have moved beyond the Indian rojak stall to a neighbouring stall selling mee siam.

It is now known that both stalls in the Geylang Serai Temporary Market shared the same refrigerator. The rojak sellers also used their neighbour's premises to store and wash their equipment.

A joint statement from the Health Ministry and National Environment Agency (NEA) said a food handler at the mee siam stall has been referred to the Communicable Disease Centre for screening. As for the five Indian rojak sellers, three have cleared tests while results for the other two are pending.

It is becoming increasingly certain from further laboratory testing that the Vibro parahaemolyticus bacteria is the source of the food poisoning, "most likely due to cross-contamination of rojak and raw seafood ingredients harbouring the bacteria," said the statement.

At last count, 154 people have been struck after eating the stall's Indian rojak, with 48 people wardened. Six patients remain in hospital.

The outbreak was cited as an example of deteriorating hygiene standards by Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan yesterday.

He gave Singapore a close to a "fail" grade on matters of hygiene, compared with the nine in 10 points during the 2003 Sars virus outbreak.

Complacency has set in, he told reporters at a Health Promotion Board event, referring to the state of public toilets today as another example.

He suggested stepping up the



Pest controllers have been laying traps and baits since last Friday to rid the Geylang Serai market of rats. PHOTO: SHIN MIN

frequency of spring-cleaning at hawker centres. NEA guidelines state that this should take place two or three times a year.

The Geylang Serai market was closed for two days for cleaners to wash the area and stallholders to scour their stalls. Pest controllers have been laying traps and baits since last Friday to rid the area of rats.

The Indian rojak stall has a C rating for hygiene.

Mr Khaw said stallholders should make an attempt to up their ratings every year. He wants public hospitals to lead the way by getting the grades of their own foodcourt stalls raised.

He noted, however, that labelling would work only if consumers paid attention to the hygiene ratings. But past surveys have shown that Singaporeans do not care about a stall's grade when

they buy food. Regulators can only inspect, punish and shame operators but, if customers stop patronising dirty stalls, the operators will learn to raise their standards, he said.

Also yesterday, more than 50 relatives and friends gathered for the funeral of Madam Norani Kassim, 58, the second death arising from eating the Indian rojak.

The market reopens today and Madam Siti Hasnah Mohd Arshad, 52, who runs a traditional Malay cakes and desserts stall, already started preparing some of the ingredients last night.

Despite the food poisoning incident, she is confident that business will proceed as usual. "This is Geylang after all - people will still want to come back and look for their favourite foods."

More reports, Home Page B1