

# Verdict of misadventure in rojak deaths

THERE was never any doubt that the Indian rojak stall at the Geylang Serai temporary market was unhygienic and poorly kept.

These findings were revealed yesterday by State Coroner Victor Yeo, at the conclusion of an inquiry into the deaths of two women who died last April after consuming food from the stall.

Madam Aminah Samijo, 57, and Madam Norani Kassim, 59, were among more than 150 who became ill, in one of the Republic's worst incidences of food poisoning in recent years.

The incident sparked a tightening up of inspections across hawker centres islandwide.

The Indian rojak stall, which was graded C for its hygiene standards in December 2008, has been ordered closed since the accident.

According to Mr Yeo, claims made by stall owner Sheik Alauddin Mohideen and his four assistants that they adhered to proper hygiene practices seemed "somewhat rehearsed and slanted", as well as "incompatible" with the evidence given by health officers who visited the stall last April.

Not only did they find the stall dirty and cockroach-infest-

ed, swabs taken from various areas within the stall showed traces of salmonella - which is commonly associated with food poisoning, as well as bacteria originating from faeces and human skin. One stall assistant even tested positive for rotavirus, which causes severe diarrhoea.

In recording a verdict of misadventure, Mr Yeo noted that the food-poisoning incident was "not a deliberate or intentional act" of the stall owner and his assistants, as they were unable to explain how their food came to be contaminated.

However, the National Environment Agency said in a statement issued yesterday that it was reviewing the coroner's findings together with the Attorney-General's Chambers, to decide on the appropriate action that may be taken against the involved parties. They declined to elaborate further.

Mr Yeo noted that what eventually killed the two women was a bug identified as *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* - commonly found in raw seafood.

Calling the incident "unusual and unfortunate", he acknowledged that while death is usually rare in most cases, the infection caused by the bacteria was exacerbated by the women's pri-

or medical conditions, leading to eventual organ failure.

While there is no doubt that the outbreak of food poisoning was directly linked to the stall, what remains a mystery is where exactly the bacteria came from and how the food came to be contaminated, as the stall's workers had thrown all remnants of the food away by the time officers came calling.

In his closing remarks, Mr Yeo said: "It is hoped...that the sad loss of two lives would serve as a constant reminder to all food handlers to strictly observe good food-handling practices and proper personal-hygiene practices at all times."

Madam Norani's son, who declined to be named, said that with the end of the hearing, the family has found closure.

They, along with Madam Aminah's family, are in talks with lawyers about possibly taking legal action.

He added that what he could not accept was that Mr Alauddin had yet to personally call on the families to apologise or offer his condolences.

When approached at his flat yesterday, Mr Alauddin refused to comment further on the matter.