

(Check against recording by Soo Siew Keong)

**TRANSCRIPT OF PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG'S
DOORSTOP INTERVIEW ON NICOLL HIGHWAY COLLAPSE
ON 21 APRIL 2004**

Mr Goh: "This is a major accident, but I would say we are very fortunate that there were so few casualties. Workers, I was told, could hear the cracking sound and they had about 15 minutes to get out. Otherwise, maybe 13, 14 more might have been injured or might have even died. So, to the families of the victims, I extend to them my sincere condolences. But this thing has happened, we'll get into the bottom of it, how it has happened. Probably, there'll be a public inquiry as to the cause of the collapse of the wall of the Circle Line, but for the time being, the immediate task is to see whether we can rescue those who are missing and if they're dead, unfortunately, then to see how we can recover the bodies. But looking at the nature of the site and the extent of the collapse of the road and the tunnel, I was told this is a very complex and delicate task. We can't simply put a crane to lift up the debris because that can cause the ground to shift and if the ground shifts further, there'll be other consequential disasters and the worry now, of course, is whether the surrounding areas could be damaged by further shifts. We are quite certain that the buildings over here are all stable and safe. Very intricate instruments are being used to monitor any shifts. I asked them if the ground shifts, would people have warning time. They assured me that if it happens, people would have warning time. It's not going to happen so quickly, but they are nevertheless very, very careful to ensure that whatever they do won't cause further collapse of the road or some structures over here.

"I would say, this thing has happened, it's unfortunate. So, I look at what we've done from the time the accident happened. Now, fortunately, our people have responded very well. The speed in which they responded, the way they coordinated the various tasks in handling a complex situation, I would say, was commendable. The PUB people were here, the Civil Defence people were here, the engineers and so on, and on the whole, I would say that they've done a very good job in coordinating, in responding to a crisis. That's what is important because what has happened has happened, but how you respond to a crisis is a further mark of our ability to cope with disasters. So, you've seen for yourself the nature of the collapse of the wall. I just hope that they will be able to find the missing people or missing bodies."

Q: "PM, sir, do you think that there could be any actions taken against any contractors?"

Mr Goh: "I would not worry about that at the moment. Let's have the inquiry as to the cause and then if anybody is negligent, I'm sure that will follow. But at this moment, it is the rescue operation and where do we go from here. So, I would not want to conjecture as to what will happen."

Q: "PM, when did you first find out about the accident?"

Mr Goh: "I was in Parliament. The meeting just ended and I was in the Members' Room, talking to some ministers and MPs. Then somebody said, "Oh, Nicoll Highway has collapsed" and I looked at the TV. CNA showed that Nicoll Highway has collapsed. But from the TV, we would not be able to appreciate the extent of the accident. So, I told Wong Kan Seng and Yeo Cheow Tong that they better come and have a look immediately, you see, and give me a report. So, of course, both of them came and sized up the situation and they kept me informed as to the nature of the accident. So, I thought, better leave them alone and leave the workers here to tend to the situation and not complicate matters by rushing here. So, let the professionals handle this. Once they have stabilised the situation, then, as you could see, I had come for the briefing."

Q: "And now that you're here, what is your reaction, your feelings, seeing the site itself in person?"

Mr Goh: "It's one of shock that this thing has happened, but the other feeling is one of relief that such a major accident and the casualties were small. But whatever casualties, whatever the number, a casualty is a casualty, but nevertheless, there's a sense of relief that matters could have been worse. But it is a major accident for us here."

Q: "PM, how confident are you that the missing are still alive?"

Mr Goh: "I think, to be very frank, with each passing hour, it's difficult. They've sent in the sniffer dog, they've done everything possible, they haven't discovered any sign of life. So, to the families, it is difficult, but the hope is still being kept alive for the time being. I would leave it to Civil Defence people..."

Mr Wong: "Our rescuers will certainly do their best."

Mr Goh: "Yeah. So, we do not want to come to any conclusion at this stage until they tell me that there's no more hope. So, as long as there's some hope, they should do their utmost to do what they can."

Q: "PM, what is being done for people get compensation?"

Mr Goh: "No, we worry about that later on. I know these things interest many people, but when there is a crisis, you must know what steps to take. Now, for example, I would not expect engineers and Civil Defence people coming here to worry about suing others and contractors and compensation. No, the immediate task is to rescue people who have been trapped, who are trapped and then we plan the next step and damage control of the area. And then they've got to plan how to carry on in getting the Nicoll Highway open again. I don't know whether they have told you about the time, but they told me it may take six to three months to get the road ready..."

Mr Yeo: "LTA had said six to nine months."

Mr Wong: "It will be longer."

Mr Goh: "Yeah, six to nine months. Yes, that is what they told me. So, we all have to live with the inconvenience with moving around over the six to nine months."

Q: "So, your message to the general population is confidence might be a little bit shaken by this accident?"

Mr Goh: "No, I think this accident, we've got to live with them. As I said, how we responded was what I was looking for. You can't wish that the accident won't have happened. It has happened. So, when it's happened, my interest is to see how we respond to a crisis and my confidence has gone up. If we didn't respond well, then I would be very worried and, of course, I would want to make sure that it would never happen again in terms of their response."

SCDF Commissioner: "For every disaster, there will be lessons to be learnt. We'll learn the lessons here, too."

Mr Goh: "So, I have told the ministers that whilst they've responded well from what I could see, but use this, nevertheless, as a lesson, how we cope with disaster. So, in every disaster, let's try and benefit in terms of learning lessons from it for future responses. But better still, learn how to prevent such things from happening and we will do that, so that you would not have another major disaster of this kind. Alright."

Q: "PM, when do we start looking at where the responsibility for this?"

Mr Goh: "Oh, when they form the public inquiry, I think minister can tell you."

Mr Yeo: "I've told them just now already."

Mr Goh: "So, the Minister, Mr Yeo, said that we should form a public inquiry and we have agreed that that will be formed to get into the causes of the accident."

Q: "Based on?"

Mr Goh: "As to when, I would not know. I think I'll leave it to them to decide."

Mr Yeo: "We'll make an announcement in the next few days."

Mr Goh: "But I think, over the next few days, let's concentrate on what we can do to rescue those who are still missing and to stabilise the vicinity. It is stable, but let's make sure that we don't do anything stupid as to cause instability. Yes, okay."

Q: "PM, based on initial investigation, can you roughly estimate how much ...(indistinct)...had lost, currently?"

Mr Goh: "I have not been briefed, so I would not know."

Q: "Have you received any messages of support from other leaders or offers of help?"

Mr Goh: "No, this is... There are many more major casualties compared to this one, an earthquake elsewhere which could have killed hundreds of people. In terms of life losses, this is, for us, of course, unfortunate, but on a world scale, it is very small."

Mr Wong: "We can manage it."

Mr Goh: "We can manage it."

Q: "Mr Yeo mentioned that various bodies are involved in the investigation. Which bodies are those?"

Mr Yeo: "I already said that the Labour Ministry have come here because the construction site comes under the Factories Act, so they've come to take a look, but the actual investigation can only begin once the rescue operations have been completed and the engineers can enter the site to do the recovery of the evidence."

Q: "But initial investigations...?"

Mr Wong: "I think we should take it one step at a time and not rush into all these future scenarios."

Mr Goh: "Let's respond in a mature way. When something has happened, was my first question who is to be blamed? No. My first question is, are there lives lost? Where are they? How can we save them? How do we control damage, prevent further losses? And those questions that you ask are legitimate questions, but they would have to be addressed at the right time. Right, thank you."

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/Nicoll Highway – PM doorstep-21 Apr 04 (checked by SK)