

# 'Anarchic' Poipet fees decried

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**N**EW reports of border officials at Poipet International Checkpoint demanding extra from travellers crossing the border between Cambodia and Thailand have again thrown the spotlight on the oft-maligned western gateway to the Kingdom, with an opposition lawmaker pledging action to stop the "anarchy".

From fees for a "VIP" service, to demands for money for cash-strapped guards to pay for utilities, paper and ink, the most recent complaints were "typical" of a years-long culture of irregular payments being exacted at the Banteay Meanchey province crossing, said Sum Chankea, provincial coordinator for rights group Adhoc.

According to a 34-year-old Cambodian, who recently travelled to Thailand with his wife, border officials proffered two explanations as to why they needed an extra \$5, despite their being no fee for Cambodians to exit their homeland.

"At the departure office, [the official] saw that my wife had a new passport and said we needed to pay 10,000 riel to have it stamped," the man, who declined to be named, said.

"In another case, they asked for 10,000 riel to help pay their water and electricity bills. We gave them the money or else they would have used this or that excuse, and it would have



Tourists disembark from a bus in the border town of Poipet before crossing into Thailand. Poipet checkpoint officials have been accused of charging tourists extra processing fees to pay for utility bills. BLOOMBERG

added hours to our trip."

He continued: "How are they not able to pay their water and electricity bills? Those officials had an iPhone 6 and an iPhone 6 Plus, and they wear rings and they are fat."

However, the checkpoint's immigration police chief, Colonel Sim Sam Arth, yesterday denied the accusations, saying heavy monitoring and booths designed to only allow passports to change hands, prevented such payments.

He instead suggested other people milling around the border, such as tour guides or

brokers who help people complete their application forms, were responsible. "We cannot demand money from people; if [officials] demand money, they will be spotted, as there hundreds of people and the place is fitted with cameras," Sam Arth said. "This demand for 10,000 riel does not exist."

Unconvinced things are running correctly, opposition lawmaker Son Chhay, who crossed the checkpoint on Saturday, pledged to write a letter to the Ministry of Interior to "stop the anarchy".

Chhay said he saw officials

offering a fast-track service to those waiting to get their exit stamp as queues ballooned amid a long delay blamed on a computer virus.

"They act like that to force the people to pay informally to the immigration officials with 20 baht or 10,000 riel per person via a broker if they want to depart quickly and not spend hours waiting," Chhay said.

The owner of a tour agency, who requested anonymity, said though he was unaware of immigration police demanding bribes, at crowded times, the VIP queue costs about \$2.50. ■