

1983: Cable car tragedy at Sentosa

Seven people were killed in the accident, giving rise to a sense of apprehension towards the then-fledgling island resort development. **BY LYNETTE KHOO**

Major investments had already gone into its development since the formation of Sentosa Development Corporation in 1972. Unfortunately, tragedy struck 10 years later.

Two cable cars plunged into the Sentosa waterway on Jan 29, 1983 after the cable was struck by a rig being towed out to sea at the nearby Keppel Harbour. One of the cars was empty, but the five passengers in the other car were killed. Another cable car oscillated so violently that three passengers were thrown out, of whom only one survived the ordeal.

A gripping rescue mission over the next several hours recovered another 13 passengers who were trapped in four cars – two cars over land and two over water – between Mount Faber and Sentosa. But a total of seven people lost their lives in this accident.

To prevent similar occurrences, the government implemented various measures such as legislating and implementing new height restrictions for vessels entering Keppel Harbour. More than 30 years on, Sentosa has come into its own as a prominent tourist destination in Asia.

1983 was also the year that saw some major corporate actions that eventually led to the formation of some of Singapore's prominent corporations today.

Keppel Shipyard's ambitious S\$500 million move to acquire The Straits Steamship Company, an established shipping company with substantial land holdings in Singapore, was critical in the creation of Singapore's largest industrial conglomerate listed here, Keppel Corporation.

Under the Keppel umbrella, Straits Steamship's non-property businesses were grouped under Steamers Maritime Holdings (Steamers), which later became Keppel Telecommunications & Transportation. The renamed Straits Steamship Land became the property unit known today as Keppel Land.

In 1983, *The Business Times* also covered how the Monetary Authority of Singapore defended the Singapore dollar from speculators by selling US\$50 million through a broker in the foreign exchange market. Looming US interest rates hikes, a fall in the Indonesian rupiah and a potential currency devaluation race in other parts of the world had fuelled rumours about a potential devaluation of Singapore's currency not just in domestic markets, but also in London, Jakarta and New York. That move by MAS, however, quashed such rumours.

Excerpt



Rescuers hover over a stranded cable car.

A sense of proportion

IN THE aftermath of the Sentosa cable cars tragedy, a degree of over-reaction is to be expected. Many Singaporeans are saying they will not travel on the system when it re-opens; they will stick to the ferry. If this attitude is extrapolated, presumably the sinking of a ferry would have meant everyone switching to the cable cars. But human logic does not extend that far and the aerial route to Sentosa, unlike the sea one, is still regarded in some quarters as a dangerous gimmick. That is a very sad attitude.

Some five million passenger journeys have been made on the cable cars since the system opened in 1974. In all that time, seven people have died, all of them because of an incident whose cause had no connection

with the running of the cars as such. Therefore, the safety record of the system is as good as any other form of transportation. On a percentage basis, any actuary will confirm that it is probably safer to get on the Sentosa cable car than it is to cross most roads.

There is no tragedy greater than the loss of human life in such an incident, but those who study the totality of events have a duty to keep a level head. The Sentosa Development Corporation, which has not escaped criticism in the past, has made considerable progress of late in putting together a coherent strategy for the island's development and the dead will not thank the living if such progress is halted in its tracks by reaction to a single incident.

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APRIL 8, 1983

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