# Costly but substandard bridge

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It took over a decade and P1.22 billion in taxpayer money to complete the bridge connecting the Cabagan and Santa Maria towns of the province of Isabela, but a mere seconds for a section of the newly retrofitted structure to collapse.

Four vehicles including the dump truck loaded with boulders weighing 102 tons crashed into a dried up section of the bank of Cagayan river below, leaving five with minor injuries and a young boy with critical head and body injuries, a heartbreaking incident that paints an ugly picture of the steep cost of possible corruption and incompetence.

Consider these facts: the bridge, which features an “aesthetic design” with 12 arch bridges with 60-meter and nine-span prestressed concrete girders, was supposed to be completed back in 2019 at a cost of P639 million and was even celebrated by the Duterte administration as one of its “Build build build” projects.

However, completion of what was supposed to be a landmark in the province was pushed back to 2021 after a third-party audit found flaws in the design, deeming it unsuitable for the proposed length and projected carrying capacity.

This cost the Filipino public an additional P274.8 million in retrofitting work to make sure that the new bridge was safe enough for people and vehicles to pass through.

## Substandard materials

Retrofitting was completed on Feb. 1, but less than two months later, the third span of the 900-meter, nine-span structure collapsed on Feb 27.

The blame is being placed squarely on the truck driver who still crossed knowing that the weight of the cargo he was transporting far exceeded the bridge’s carrying capacity of 45 tons.

But while the driver certainly has a lot to answer for, the fault does not lie with him alone.

His crossing of that bridge—which has not even been formally inaugurated—was just the proverbial final straw, with corruption feared to be the bigger culprit, and the primary reason why a section of the bridge failed so soon after it was opened to the public.

The regional office of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) is still conducting an official investigation, with experts from its Bureau of Design and Bureau of Construction of tapped to “conduct further evaluation and assessment.”

DPWH Cagayan Valley officer in charge engineer Mathias Malenab refuted allegations that substandard materials had been used during construction, adding that the bridge had passed standards and specifications.

## Congressional inquiry

Instead of being reassured by Malenab’s assurances, however, allegations of corruption, inadequate inspections and shoddy work by the contractors and possible collusion with local DPWH inspectors are gaining more traction, especially as the DPWH has long been perceived as a public agency ridden with corruption.

The Marcos administration’s commitment to get to the bottom of the situation and punish those involved is therefore welcome.

“If there is any trace of corruption in what happened from 2014 until now, those responsible must be held accountable” and face consequences, including imprisonment, according to Palace Press Office Claire Castro.

House Deputy Minority Leader and ACT Teachers Rep. France Casto has called for congressional inquiry to determine accountability at all levels. “It’s alarming that a P1.22 billion bridge that was just retrofitted on Feb. 1 has already collapsed. This is not just a simple accident or mere negligence. We need to examine the possibility of corruption and substandard materials,” she said in Filipino.

At the Senate, Senate Minority Leader Sen. Koko Pimentel has filed a resolution calling for an inquiry on the Isabela bridge collapse and other similar incidents which he said have “reached an alarming level.”

Sen. Ramon Revilla Jr., who chairs the Senate committee on public works, said that indeed, “heads must roll” and even sought that the contractor be blacklisted and made to fix the bridge at no additional cost to Filipinos.

## Rigorous safety standards

Former senator Panfilo Lacson, for his part, said that such infrastructure failures simply must not occur and it is the mandate of the local governments as well as the DPWH to ensure that they pass rigorous safety standards with people’s lives and property on the line.

“What is the purpose of a bridge if trucks can’t pass through it? Maybe the materials were substandard. Until someone is held accountable and jailed, this won’t stop,’’ Lacson said.

Lacson expressed fears shared by many Filipinos that unless culprits are appropriately sanctioned, this will not be an isolated case and indeed will happen again, endangering Filipinos.

Indeed, the collapse of the portion of the Isabela bridge must be taken as a needed wake-up call for the DPWH to be more rigorous in its supervision of vital public infrastructure projects, from the design to the execution by the right contractors and to maintenance to ensure that these are at the very least safe for Filipinos to use.