

Outcry over Philippines orphanage fire

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Philippines President Joseph Estrada has personally come to the defence of the Manila fire department in the face of a public outcry over the fire that last Thursday destroyed an orphanage and killed 28 people, including 23 children. Residents of the slums behind the orphanage have accused the fire services of failing to respond to the blaze in time to save the children because the area is poor.

There were pitiful scenes after the fire demolished the 85-year-old wooden structure known as Settlement House in Paco, a neighbourhood of Metro Manila, the nation's capital. Many children, mostly babies, were quickly burned or suffocated. Another 13 infants died trapped in a group, unable to escape through padlocked doors and metal window grills. Others died huddled in the arms of orphanage parents.

In many cases their bodies were charred beyond recognition. Officials asserted that even fingerprints no longer existed. Early reports suggested that the remains would be buried in a mass grave but authorities later promised that individual plots would be provided.

Earlier, neighbours could only watch helplessly as children cried for help from the grilled second-floor windows. Rescuers could not enter the padlocked front gate. Miraculously, another 14 adults and 23 children, all aged less than 7, survived, some by sliding down concrete escape chutes.

According to fire officials, 70 percent of the compound was alight when firefighters arrived shortly after 2 am. They said intense heat prevented them from going near the structure. The wooden floors and ceilings were the first to catch alight, they said, followed by cotton mattresses that quickly became fire traps from which there was no escape. Then part of the roof caved in. Most of the survivors had been asleep on the ground floor.

By the time the inferno, which broke out at 1.30 am, was doused two hours later, it had completely gutted

the compound, whose earliest structure was built in 1913. Run with little government assistance by a private charity, Settlement House consisted of a three-storey main building, a nursery hall and two cottages for orphans and mothers. It catered for abandoned, neglected or abused babies and infants up to the age of 7, after which they were turned over to the government. It was also a refuge for unmarried mothers, and working parents in the neighbourhood left their children there when they went to work.

Residents were outraged because only one government fire truck arrived to fight the blaze, about half an hour after the fire started. Captain Bienvenido Escoto, deputy operations chief of the Manila fire department, said two trucks responded but one overheated while refilling its tank with water from a fire hydrant. He acknowledged that all the city's fire trucks were secondhand and that most needed repair, with only 15 of about 40 trucks in working condition. This is in a city of about eight million people.

Voluntary brigades funded by business groups eventually sent 16 fire trucks to the scene. In Manila, business organisations finance about 100 fire trucks, with better radio equipment and faster response times.

Speaking in the Congress, Representative Rolando Andaya Jr said less than one-third of the country's more than 1,500 municipalities had a fire truck. He pointed out that the proposed 1999 national budget had practically no allocation for new trucks. Andaya appealed to President Estrada 'to tap into his discretionary funds and see to it that all towns would be equipped with at least one fire truck'.

One young woman from the Paco slums dismissed official claims that firefighters reached the scene in less than two minutes. She told reporters that local leaders had quickly sent men to the nearest fire station, just 1.5 kilometres away, yet the fire trucks had taken 25 minutes to arrive. 'They did not want to come here

because they thought the fire was at the squatters' area. We even had to give 1,000 pesos to one of the firemen so that he would douse water on our houses since the fire was already quite near.'

Without waiting for any official investigation, Estrada defended the fire service. 'I believe the fire trucks responded quickly,' he declared in his weekly radio program. 'I had this investigated. I think they reached the scene in less than 10 minutes.'

Estrada promised to swiftly rebuild Settlement House with the help of Manila City Mayor Lito Atienza. He said the national and city governments would pool resources and also take donations from private groups and individuals. The tragedy has highlighted the lack of facilities to care for the children of the working class and the poor. The survivors are now in a government Children's Reception and Study Center in Quezon City. Evelyn Lontok, a social work specialist with the Department of Social Welfare and Development, explained that there were not enough suitable orphanages and day-care centres for poor children.

The ancient Settlement House, operated by the Fundacion de Demas de Filipinas, had been home to thousands of poor children for more than eight decades. Before the fire it provided accommodation or day-care to 80 children. For its funding it depended on the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes, the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corp, the SM Group of Companies, Community Chest and individual donors. 'We run on 200,000 pesos (\$US5,500) a month,' the foundation's president, Elenita Nolasco, told reporters. The amount was barely enough for expenses and salaries for social workers, teachers, housemothers and health workers.

Settlement House was an obvious firetrap. Asked about the lack of fire exits, a foundation official, Aida Cabilao, said there had been no need for such facilities because 'there were a lot of doors and windows'. The cause of the blaze has not been established but faulty electrical wiring is suspected. 'Most probably the electrical system was old,' noted Pennimore Jaudian, Manila's chief arson investigator.

Among the mourners outside Settlement House was Rainer Galang, 22, a victim of another fire--the Ozone Disco blaze two years ago. 'Definitely, the government has a lot to answer about what happened here,' she said. 'This is a public place. Why wasn't it inspected for

violations of fire safety regulations?'

The Settlement House fire was the worst in Manila City since 1996, when the Ozone Disco fire in Quezon City took the lives of at least 160 people, many of them teenagers celebrating their graduation from high school. In August last year, five children perished when fire engulfed an orphanage in Dumaquete City.

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