

Australian backpacker hostel victims had no chance of escaping fire

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When police this week for the first time allowed reporters to briefly view the burned-out inside of the Palace Backpackers Hostel in Queensland, Australia, it was obvious that the 15 young fruit pickers who died in last Friday's fire had no way to escape the blaze.

The worst of the fire's devastation was on the top floor of the 98-year-old wooden building, where the fire gutted the rooms in just 15 minutes. It was on the top floor that the young people lost their lives. Ten of the victims were sleeping in one room and four in another. There was only one exit from these adjoining rooms and it led directly to the narrow stairway where the flames swept up from below.

Reporters were still not permitted to examine these two rooms but it was revealed that the 10 victims in one room had struggled to escape through a barred window.

Reporting for the *Melbourne Age*, Greg Roberts observed: "Access was denied to the two adjoining bedrooms upstairs where all but one of the victims perished. What is clear, however, is that the location of those rooms gave the young people sleeping inside no chance; their only exit was located near the top of a stairwell, and the centre of the inferno.

"When the alarm was raised, they would have been driven back from the doorways by flames sucked up the stairwell by air drafts from the lounge room, where the fire originated."

Another reporter described the utter devastation inside the shell of the hostel, where 90 exhausted fruit pickers had slept in two or three-level bunks, either in a large ground floor dormitory or a rabbit warren of tiny upstairs rooms.

"Charcoaled wooden bunk-posts ravaged by flames, and two enamel wash basins, are at first sight all that remains on the side of the hostel where the fire first started. With the stench of smoke still hanging inside

the charred shell of the hostel, it becomes clear how easily 15 young backpackers lost their fight to survive the blistering inferno.

"Up the 18 metal steps to the top-level deck, the 20 maze-like rooms—which days before housed weary fruit pickers—are a levelled mess of ash against a concrete backdrop."

Some survivors and parents of victims have raised questions about the failure of the fire alarm, the absence of smoke detectors and sprinklers, and the lack of fire extinguishers. While the Australian media has not reported these concerns, the BBC noted that a South Wales MP, Ted Rowlands, has called for tighter safety measures. Two of the victims came from South Wales.

Rowlands tried but failed to secure an emergency parliamentary statement on the subject. He urged British ministers to raise the issue with Australian government officials to ease the minds of parents whose children are backpacking in Australia.

Police have not yet publicly identified the victims and say that DNA testing may be necessary where bodies have been badly burned. The 15 presumed to have been killed include Natalie Morris 23, Melissa Smith, Gary Sutton 25, Michael Lewis 25, Sarah Williams 22, and one unidentified person, all from Britain. Other victims are believed to be Atsusti Toyono 26 from Japan, 22-year-old twins Stacey and Kelly Slarke 22 from Western Australia, Julie O'Keefe 24 from Ireland, and Joly van der Velden and Sebastian Westerfeild from the Netherlands. Two unidentified victims are thought to come from Korea and Iran.

The relatives of some of the Australian victims have arrived in the small agricultural town of Childers, while the families of some overseas victims are due to arrive by the end of the week. It is likely that they will want answers to why such hazardous fire conditions were

tolerated by authorities.

Queensland Fire and Rescue spokesman Bob Hook has stated that smoke detectors are not compulsory for pre-existing buildings under Queensland law. Buildings only had to meet the fire standards in place at the time they were constructed. Nor were annual fire inspections compulsory for many of the state's backpacker hostels because of different local government regulations.

All week the coverage in the Australian media has concentrated almost exclusively on the possibility of the fire being deliberately lit. Before any significant evidence had been gathered, a 37-year-old itinerant fruit picker, Robert Long, became the media's most wanted man. His photo—presented like a police mug shot—has been featured in every newspaper day after day.

Long stayed at the Palace Hostel until he was apparently evicted for not paying rent. It is alleged that he argued with people at the hostel and on the evening of the fire was seen by one resident shortly before the blaze started. After an intensive manhunt, Long was arrested on Wednesday near Childers. He was shot in the right arm before being overpowered and is now under police guard in Maryborough Hospital.

Long's trial by media has been part of a determined effort to shift the focus away from any examination of the dangerous conditions in the hostel, let alone any analysis of the extensive backpacking industry that has mushroomed around Australia over the past decade. Each year hundreds of thousands of backpackers, many from overseas, provide a crucial cheap labour force in many rural districts. They are invariably housed in low-cost, ageing and over-crowded hostels.

Just three days after the Childers tragedy, there was a hostel fire in Sydney's Kings Cross. Five people were in the hostel when the fire began at 1am. It is believed that a faulty heater caught alight. The premises had no fire alarms. According to the owner, Hamish Bowman, who has recently leased the building, no fire alarms were required because the establishment was classed as a boarding house, not a hostel.

Just how consciously the media witchhunt against Long has been used to divert attention away from the fire safety and underlying issues was revealed in a *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial on Tuesday. It commented: "It is all too easy to call for stricter fire and safety regulations for backpackers hostels. The

more detail that emerges from the fire the more likely it seems that very little could have been done to prevent it. If the fire was deliberately lit, it is hard to see what may have stood in the way of a disaster of this kind".

Whether the fire was the result of arson or not, the fact remains that so many young fruit pickers died because of the way they were crammed into the highly flammable timber hostel. The premises were full, just as they have been consistently over the past eight years. It was a disaster waiting to happen.

The owners of the Childers Palace Backpackers Hostel advertise it on the Internet as a place where, for \$90 a week, young people can sleep and the management will arrange fruit picking work for them. Many farmers and labour-hire contractors recruit directly from the hostel, as they do elsewhere. Unskilled farm workers are paid just \$9.45 an hour after tax for backbreaking work, often on 12-hour shifts.

State and federal political leaders have publicly expressed great anguish over the Childers fire. They are concerned about the impact on the backpacking industry, which is worth close to \$1.6 billion a year. Government and tourism officials estimate that backpackers stay an average of 70 nights in Australia and spend \$4,560 each during their visit. Of the 352,200 overseas backpackers who arrived in Australia in 1998, 65 percent went to Queensland, attracted by the warm weather and the availability of fruit and vegetable picking for 10 months of the year.



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