

Philippines hotel fire reveals neglect of safety standards

John Roberts
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More than 70 people are dead and 100 injured, over half of them seriously, after a devastating fire broke out in the Manor Hotel in the Philippine capital of Manila early on Saturday morning. The flames spread rapidly through the third and fourth floors of the budget hotel, which is located in the Quezon City area of suburban Manila.

Quezon City mayor Feliciano Belmonte reported that 62 of the victims died at the scene and 13 later in hospital. Two were hotel staff members. Many of the rest were guests booked into the hotel to attend a conference organised by the American-based Christian evangelical organisation—the Dawn Flowers Ministry. It was the worst hotel fire in the country’s history.

Investigators believe the fire may have started as the result of a short circuit in a third floor stockroom near a karaoke bar and restaurant. Although it was two hours before the fire was extinguished, only one of the victims died of burns. Most deaths were caused by smoke inhalation. Many of the victims were found in hallways and rooms on upper floors that were untouched by the flames.

The six-storey hotel had no working smoke alarms. Some of the fire exits were locked or obstructed and there were no emergency lights or sprinkler systems. A security guard tried to warn guests by discharging a pistol but the shot was drowned out by the noise of the hotel’s air conditioning system. Guests who tried to escape found their windows barred by anti-burglary iron grilles.

There were distressing scenes as trapped guests pleaded with firemen through the grilles to rescue them. Firemen used metal grinders to cut through the bars but only managed to save 18 people. At least two others jumped to safety. “Without a doubt there would have been more people rescued if there had been no iron grilles on the windows,” Mayor Belmonte said.

The tragedy has provoked public outrage, not least because there have been two other major fire disasters in

the same local government area over the past three years. In 1998, 162 people, mainly teenagers, were killed in a blaze at the Ozone Disco, which had no alarm systems, emergency lights, sprinkler systems or proper fire exits. A fire at the Lung Centre, also in 1998, killed 20 patients.

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo rushed to the area, promising assistance to the victims. She ordered an investigation and the laying of charges within 48 hours. The only person charged over the fire has been the hotel’s owner William Tan Genato, whom the police are still trying to find. Interior Secretary Jose Lina has sacked the Quezon City Fire Marshal, Ricardo Lemence.

But the flurry of activity and the short deadline suggest a search for scapegoats rather than a thorough investigation into the causes of the fire. The United Firefighters Association has accused regional officials of rushing to find a “sacrificial lamb” and cover up the real extent of responsibility for the fire. Local radio stations began to accuse government officials of corruption when it became clear that Lemence had filed a report last August citing the Manor Hotel for 11 major violations of the fire code.

Firefighters association spokesman Alvin Estrada issued a statement questioning Arroyo’s decision to appoint National Capital Region Fire Marshal Romeo Villafuerte to head the investigation. He pointed out that sacked Quezon City fire chief Lemence had presented his report on the Manor Hotel to Villafuerte, who had taken no action to correct any of the dangers identified. Estrada said Villafuerte had also failed to complete an investigation into the February 22 fire at the Philippine International Convention Centre.

Mayor Belmonte indicated that others were involved in allowing the hotel to function in breach of basic fire safety regulations. He told the media that it was a “logical conclusion” that corrupt city officials had conspired with the hotel owner. “Actually it would appear,” he said,

“that Manor has been continuously violating all sorts of rules and nobody has been doing anything about it.”

More evidence of corrupt practices emerged on Monday when Interior Secretary Lina closed another Quezon City hotel owned by Genato after Bureau of Fire Protection officers visited it. The Sir William Hotel, which violated more fire and safety regulations than the Manor Hotel, had been granted a business license by city officials without being issued a compulsory fire safety inspection certificate.

Belmonte has since sacked city engineer Alferdo Macapagay and his office records have been placed under police guard. Macapagay held the position during the city’s three major fires and is still facing charges of reckless imprudence for the Ozone Disco fire three years ago. The city’s business permits chief, Ricardo Galvez, has also been dismissed.

An editorial in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* decried the official response to the fire. “After brief, whirlwind moves to show that something was being done about the problem of potential firetraps, the government officials and owners of buildings continued to go on in their usual, devil-may-care way, unperturbed by the possibility that their negligence and apathy could kill scores of people in the future. Which was what actually happened last Saturday.”

But after pointing to gross official negligence, the newspaper threw up its hands and declared that the fault lay with Filipinos who “do not place a big value on human life” and adopt the fatalistic attitude of “*Bahala na* (We leave it to God)”. The chief culprit, however, is not ordinary Filipinos but the social system in the Philippines and elsewhere that puts profits ahead of human life and thereby fosters a climate of bureaucratic indifference, criminal negligence and outright corruption, even when elementary safety standards are at stake.



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