

Karaoke bar fire kills 53 in Indonesia

John Edwards
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Fifty-three people died after fire engulfed a karaoke bar in the Indonesia port city of Palembang on the island of Sumatra on the evening of July 7. As the fire swept through the five-floor Heppi Karaoke bar, people were trapped inside because the building had just one stairwell and the only elevator had failed.

Firefighters used explosives to blast a hole through walls on the upper floors to allow those inside to escape. While the majority died from the smoke and heat some were killed when they jumped from the burning building. The fire, the worst in decades in Palembang, was so intense that many of the bodies were burnt beyond recognition.

From the second floor up the building was a maze of small rooms with different bars and restaurants but it had only one entrance and no emergency exits or fire stairs. Firefighters suspect that an electrical fault started the blaze, but irrespective of the precise cause the building was a disaster waiting to happen. The owner had reportedly violated the building permit by adding two floors without permission.

Police arrested the karaoke bar manager in Jakarta and returned him to Palembang for questioning and a search was underway for the building's owner. However, the owner and manager are not the only ones to blame for the tragedy. Similar firetraps exist across Indonesia.

In the rush for development the most basic fire safety standards are either ignored or sidestepped. According to the head of the Jakarta Fire Agency, Johnny Pangaribuan, almost half the 542 high-rise buildings in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, have no proper fire safety systems. Government departments even fail to comply with fire regulations—the 19-storey Ministry of National Education has been cited for having blocked fire exits.

Jakarta provides a glimpse of conditions nationally. The fire department has admitted that about 60 percent of the city's 1,271 entertainment centres lack

“adequate life saving equipment and fire protection systems”. Many lock their fire doors to assist security monitoring of premises.

Fire is not just a threat in high-rise buildings but also poses serious dangers in the densely populated slums that have sprung up in Jakarta over the past 20 years. Every year blazes destroy large numbers of slum dwellings. Early this month 700 people were left homeless by a fire at Pendongkelan in East Jakarta.

In June three separate fires destroyed 20 buildings, 100 houses and 17 houses respectively. The last fire resulted in the death of a family of three, including a young girl. Fires like these are a regular occurrence in Jakarta with other cities experiencing similar incidents.

The Building Control Agency has admitted there were over 772 fires in Jakarta (or more than two per day) last year, with 18 people killed and 305 buildings gutted. Up to 80 percent of these occur in slum areas where the devastation is compounded by inflammable building materials, poorly designed construction, lack of fire hydrants and access difficulties for fire crews.

Jakarta, with over eight million people, has 83 fire stations and some 2,500 firefighters. However the city has only 1,000 fire hydrants and not all operate properly.

While fire safety regulations exist for high-rise buildings the fines are so small that owners simply pay them and business continues. Despite a recent increase in the maximum fine to 5 million rupiah (\$US550) the head of the Jakarta Building Control Agency, Jumhama Tjakrawirya, told the *Jakarta Post* that courts usually impose fines of only 300,000 rupiah (\$US33), which owners can easily afford.

The Palembang karaoke bar fire is part of a broader problem of safety being sacrificed for the sake of profit. While fire authorities have promised a crackdown on buildings not complying with the regulations, such statements, like the arrest of the manager, are designed

to divert attention from the real cause of such tragedies.



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