Worst building fire in Vietnam since end of war

Carol Divjak
5 November 2002

A huge blaze engulfed a six-storey commercial building in Ho Chi Minh City during the afternoon of October 29. The official death toll from the inferno—the city's worst in the 27 years since the end of the Vietnam War—has risen to 60. More people are missing, feared dead.

According to police, seven bodies have still to be identified. Some are so badly burned that normal identification procedures are impossible and DNA testing will be needed. More than 100 people were hospitalised as a result of the fire. As of last weekend, 32 had not been discharged.

The blaze started at about 1.30pm when the building was packed with lunchtime shoppers. Set in the heart of the commercial district of the former capital of South Vietnam, the International Trading Center had several floors of shops, about 50 offices, a disco, a restaurant and a meeting hall. A number of foreign companies, including from the US, UK, Australia, Germany and Hong Kong, had offices in the building.

A US insurer, American International Assurance, was conducting a training session for about 140 staff and policy agents on the fifth floor when the fire broke out. At least 23 are dead and another seven are missing.

The state media and officials were quick to rule out arson or sabotage—a theory that might have rebounded on the government. The Blue Disco, where the fire was believed to have started, has recently been the subject of criticisms in the state media for allegedly condoning "social evils" such as drug use.

Last Friday, police reported that the fire had been started by three welders who were working in the disco and accidentally set fire to plastic decoration sheets on the ceiling. Two of the workers have been arrested and charged with violating fire prevention rules. Authorities previously suggested a gas cylinder explosion, a gas leak or faulty wiring as possible causes.

Whatever started the blaze, the fire spread rapidly through the complex, which was not properly equipped with fire alarms, sprinkler systems or exits. Tran Trung Dung, an employee of Saigon Tourist, described the chaotic situation: "I heard lots of screaming and shouting from inside the building. I saw lots of people jumping from windows. It was a bloody scene."

The building had only one fire escape. One woman, who got out by climbing down a drainpipe, told the media that she heard no alarms and was only alerted by smoke and a fellow worker shouting that the building was on fire. TV footage showed scores of people trapped in the upper floors, clinging to window ledges desperately awaiting rescue as thick black smoke filled the air. A number jumped to their deaths.

The fire has exposed the inadequacy of the city's fire services. Fire crews arrived at the scene within 30 minutes only to find that they had no suitable equipment to combat the fire or rescue those trapped. It took three hours to obtain appropriate ladders to effectively fight the fire. The firefighters were not equipped with the necessary protective gear and breathing apparatus to enter the building.

The state-owned TV channel commented: "What is worrying is that firefighters were not equipped with the necessary equipment to put out the fire. It took them three hours to bring the water hose inside the building, and sometimes they did not have enough water." The fire was finally brought under control after five hours.

Nguyen Minh Triet, a member of the Communist Party's top decision-making body, the Politburo, told the media last week that building management and inspections in the city had not been strict enough. In response to public concern over the fire, he warned that any buildings in the city that failed to meet safety

© World Socialist Web Site

standards would be shut down. There is no indication, however, that the Communist Party regime is going to provide the money necessary to bolster the inspection regime or upgrade fire services.

The lack of enforcement of building regulations flows from the chaotic construction and urban development associated with the Communist Party's drive to attract foreign investment by offering cheap labour. Poor planning and building parallel the lack of proper working conditions and safety standards in the factories, as bureaucrats and entrepreneurs seek to cash in on the growing number of companies setting up operations in Vietnam.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site