

Two fires kill scores of people in China

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Despite repeated claims by Beijing that it has taken serious steps toward improving the country's appalling safety record in public buildings and industrial enterprises, at least 93 people died in two fires that occurred within hours of each other on February 15.

The first, which killed 54 people and injured more than 70, happened at 11.20 a.m. in a crowded shopping centre—Zhongbai Commercial Plaza—in China's northeast Jilin City. Shoppers on the second floor of the mall were able to escape by jumping for their lives. Many of those on higher levels were not so fortunate and perished in the smoke and flames. Injuries included serious burns, smoke inhalation and broken limbs.

Local journalists reported that wooden boards, used for carrying the dead and injured, were soaked in blood and lay scattered around the burning building. Such was the scope of the disaster that authorities had to bring ambulances from across the city. Some 60 fire engines and more than 260 firefighters were needed to put out the blaze.

A city government spokesman told the media that the fire began in the first floor. "A lot of people on the lower floors got out but many others tried to escape by going upstairs where the smoke became very thick," he said.

A survivor, Jing Qiuyue, told Associated Press that she was alerted to the fire when the light in her bathroom went off and she heard people screaming. "I threw on my clothes and ran. My hair was dripping. I didn't even put on any shoes. No lights, no doors. I could only hear people yelling, 'Help me!' I started screaming too," she said.

Jing and a friend managed to make a rope out of sheets and climb out a window. The rope was too short and both were forced to jump to the ground. Jing broke her right leg.

Local resident Ma Wenhai told the media: "At first, all I saw was smoke, then more and more people

appeared at the windows and were trying escape. It was a terrible, terrible tragedy."

Only hours later, another fire broke out in the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang, at a temple constructed with bamboo and straw in the village of Wufeng, southwest of Shanghai. At least 40 women, most of them middle-aged or elderly, were killed when the temple collapsed. One villager told the BBC that the scene was "absolutely horrible, with dozens of black bodies clumped together".

Last year, after a series of disasters, President Hu Jintao attempted to shore up Beijing's credibility by implementing new safety regulations. Following the latest tragedies, the top leadership has attempted to deflect the blame onto local officials as well as workers and villagers.

One day after the Jinlin fire, a meeting of the State Council called by Premier Wen Jiabao dispatched an investigation team to the city. Two days later, police arrested a 35-year-old man who is accused of starting the fire by throwing a cigarette in one of the storerooms.

At the same time, provincial governor Hong Hu published an open letter in the *Jinlin Daily* apologising to "people of the province and families of the victims" on behalf of the Jinlin government. As the official in charge of safety, he accepted primary responsibility for the disaster. The provincial government has set in motion an urgent but largely cosmetic campaign lasting until May to crack down on safety standards.

Last week, reporters who returned to the mall found that three quarters of the fire extinguishers were out of date. All of them were still locked away on special steel shelves when the State Council investigation team arrived. None of the managers at the Zhongbai shopping centre have been arrested for their obvious failure to comply with basic fire safety standards.

Instead, with the support of the government-

sponsored city chamber of business, the company paid compensation to the families of the victim amounting to just 80,000 yuan (about \$US10,000) each.

In Zhejiang, authorities have blamed the victims themselves. Police arrested a woman and two other people who were injured in the fire, accusing them of being involved in “illegal religion activities”. They were accused of organising “a fanatical practice” in the belief that it would enable people pass to afterlife after they die.

Local residents told Agence France Presse, however, that the makeshift “temple” was erected to replace a brick structure that local authorities had torn down. Most of the victims were local village women who used the place to pray for their children who had migrated to cities to find work.

There are obvious differences between the two tragedies. But in each case, what is revealed is the callous indifference of authorities, at all levels, to the needs and concerns of ordinary working people and the elementary safety requirements needed to prevent such disasters.

Beijing has promised remedial action, but judging on past performance, little will be done. If the two fires had not taken place simultaneously, each would probably have been ignored completely.



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