

Death toll reaches 185

Demonstrators demand “justice” in Argentine nightclub blaze

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Thousands of friends and family members marched through the streets of Buenos Aires Monday chanting for “justice” for the hundreds of youth who were killed and injured in the early morning hours of December 31 in a fire that raced through an overcrowded nightclub.

The fire was ignited by a flare apparently lit by a child who, with his parents, was attending a concert given by the popular rock group Callejeros in a nightclub in the working class Once neighborhood of central Buenos Aires.

The death toll rose to 185 Tuesday with the deaths of a 10-year-old girl and a 25-year-old woman, both of whom had been hospitalized with serious injuries suffered in the blaze. Hundreds remain hospitalized, with 138 in intensive care. Hospital authorities indicated that the prognosis for many is poor, with a number of victims on respirators or having suffered brain damage from lack of oxygen.

In a scene that recalled the demonstrations for the “disappeared” victims of Argentina’s former military dictatorship, marchers carried photographs of children, siblings and friends killed in the fire. The crowd that flowed from the scene of the fire to the Plaza de Mayo on the extremely hot afternoon was estimated at over 10,000.

In the midst of the march, a 60-year-old man doused himself with rubbing alcohol and set himself on fire, telling people around him, “I’m going with my daughter.” Other marchers were able to smother the flames.

Demonstrators insisted that the nightclub fire, one of the worst single catastrophes in Argentina’s history, had social and political causes.

“They weren’t killed by a flare, nor by rock and roll,

they were killed by corruption,” was one of the chants heard on the march.

The facts that have emerged since the end-of-the-year catastrophe are all too familiar. The venue for the concert, the “Cromagnon Republic Club,” was packed with as many as 4,500 spectators, three times its legal capacity. Four of the club’s six emergency exits were padlocked or wired shut in an attempt by management to prevent anyone from entering without paying. Piles of bodies were found by the blocked exits.

Argentina began the New Year under a pall, with newspapers and television carrying grim images of bodies of youth and children lined up for identification at a makeshift sidewalk morgue. Other photographs from the nightclub showed piles of shoes, mostly sneakers, torn off the feet of those scrambling to escape the fire, which quickly spread to flammable material on the club’s ceiling. Most of the victims died of smoke inhalation, while many fell and were trampled by the crowd.

Dozens of young children and babies were counted among the victims. The club had apparently turned a women’s restroom into a nursery for parents to leave their children during the show. Under Argentine law, children under 14 are barred from such nightclubs.

Public anger has turned against both Buenos Aires Mayor Angel Ibarra and Argentina’s President Nestor Kirchner, with many charging that payoffs and concern for profit have led to systematic neglect of safety regulations in the city’s nightclubs and other commercial establishments.

Demonstrators have repeatedly marched on Ibarra’s office demanding his resignation. The mayor, the leader of Argentina’s center-left coalition known as Frepaso,

has insisted that the blame for the blaze lies with the club's owners, and that the hazardous conditions had been introduced since fire officials inspected it last June.

A human rights lawyer has filed charges of homicide and injuries against Ibarra and other city officials. Two officials in charge of public safety in the city have already resigned.

Meanwhile, the United Left bloc in the Argentine parliament filed legal papers demanding that the courts force a guarantee of safety conditions in commercial establishments and sequester the records of the Buenos Aires inspection unit.

“Everything indicates a connivance between the government of Buenos Aires and economic sectors, in which the only thing that matters is profit at low cost and at whatever price, even that of putting thousands of lives at risk,” the court papers stated.

Kirchner failed to interrupt his vacation in his native province of Santa Cruz in the south of the country to Buenos Aires for five days after the blaze. Victims' relatives have criticized him for his silence, accusing him of indifference to the disaster. The Peronist president has responded that he did not want to politically exploit a national tragedy.

“Que se vayan todos,” or “out with all of them,” was one of the most common slogans—directed against Argentina's politicians—that was chanted in the protests over the fire. It was this same slogan that predominated in the mass upheavals provoked by drastic austerity measures and economic collapse that brought down two governments in December 2001.

Distraught relatives and friends of the fire victims demanded that no political banners be carried on the march. They chased away Juan Carlos Blumberg, throwing bottles and charging him and his bodyguards, when the wealthy businessman attempted to join the crowd outside the scene of the fire. Blumberg, whose son was kidnapped and murdered, became the spearhead of a right-wing campaign demanding a police crackdown in the city.

Argentines have criticized the relatively late and insufficient response by emergency services to the fire as well as the chaos that has characterized the return of bodies to the families. There is a pervasive feeling of anger that the mass deaths are the product not merely of a senseless tragedy, but of the social and economic

disintegration caused by massive foreign debt and draconian austerity measures over the last two decades.

Fans of the Callejeros have called for another mass demonstration on Thursday.



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