

Paris: 48 African immigrants die in apartment block fires

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On April 15, 24 Africans died in a fire at the Paris-Opéra hotel in the IX arrondissement of Paris. At midnight on August 25, another fire broke out at the apartment block at 20 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol in the XIII arrondissement, killing 17 Africans. Four days later, 7 Africans perished in a blaze in an apartment block in the Marais district of the III arrondissement, bringing the total to 48 fatalities in four months.

While the causes of the fires are still under investigation, there is no doubt that the buildings' overcrowded and dilapidated condition made them an easy target for racist attacks. Protracted government attacks on "illegal immigrants," *sans papiers*, and the law against the wearing of the Muslim veil in school have given ample encouragement to racists.

The Marais and the Vincent-Auriol fires both started in the stairwells of the building, and so could have been started by intruders.

Police investigators say that they have found no traces of hydrocarbons (petrol, etc.) or explosives in the affected buildings but are not ruling out foul play.

Julie, 16, a neighbour of 20 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol, exclaimed about the local children, "They've all been going to school together. France has screwed up, it's a crime. Why is it always blocks where there are blacks that catch fire?," echoing survivors from the apartments who are asking, "Why is it always blocks inhabited by Africans?"

Twelve Ivorian families, some 40 people, were living in the five-storey Marais squat, and four of the victims were children. The fire had started in the stairwell. Pierre Aidenbaum, Socialist Party mayor of the III arrondissement, said, "We've been reporting for several years that living conditions there are unacceptable...they were due to be rehoused in September for improvements."

René Dutrey, chairman of the joint company SIEMP, which owns the building, said that it was among "the 423 blocks of apartments most unfit for human habitation" in Paris. He added, "As long as we do not create available housing, we will be having to recover people burnt in apartment blocks."

Yves Contassot, Green Party deputy mayor of Paris, explained that renovations had been held up because undocumented inhabitants could not be found alternative lodgings. "We must get away from this situation, stop treating people as if it were the eighteenth century," he exclaimed.

The fire in the Hotel Paris-Opera, on April 15, in the luxury-shopping district of the "grands magasins" department stores in the IX arrondissement, still exacts its toll of human misery. One survivor died from injuries in July, and two others are in hospital. Promises made by politicians then have yet to be implemented.

In the Boulevard Vincent-Auriol fire, the dead are 14 children and 3 adults, some of whom died trying to escape the flames by leaping from windows of the six-storey building. Of the 30 injured, one child and one adult are reported to be in a critical condition.

The series of lethal fires has tragically underscored the housing crisis in the Paris region and France as well as the criminal neglect of national and local government and their agencies.

Twenty-seven adults and 100 children lived in the Vincent-Auriol apartments. Serge Blisko, Socialist Party mayor of the XIII arrondissement and supporter of the Laurent Fabius faction of the Socialist Party, told the press that the ravaged building may not have been in immaculate condition but was not a health hazard. Martin Hirsch, the chairman of the charity Emaüs, which is responsible for the building, said, "I'm not saying it was perfect, but it was regularly and responsibly maintained."

These complacent assessments are contradicted by several facts. The façade of the part of the house facing on to Edmond-Flamand Street, number 2, is fissured due to subsidence. Julie, 17, who lost several cousins in the fire, told the press, "All this could have been avoided. Everyone knew that the stairs were rickety, that everything was old and rotting! Nobody did anything! It's murder, not an accident." A local resident who knew the flats well said, "These poor people weren't awaiting rehousing—they were awaiting death."

Indeed, the stairs, the only means of evacuating the building, were wooden. There was no alternative fire escape—a situation that the authorities recognise to be the case in many of Paris's old blocks of apartments. The awareness that the peeling lead-based paint on the staircases was causing lead poisoning in the young children led the authorities to cover the paint with wood, thus making the building even more of a firetrap.

A policeman interviewed at the scene of the tragedy commented that there was no way to lock the front door and prevent free access to the stairwell. "A cigarette end would have been enough to ignite the litter." Residents report five small fires in the building in recent years, of which the authorities acknowledge at least one.

Mr. Jammeh, a 60-year old Gambian, told the press, "I've been living here for 14 years asking to be rehoused. I pay 500 euros rent, and the CAF [housing service] pays 500 euros [a month] for six rooms. There are leaks and rats; an Ivorian lady's children were bitten."

Christian Oudot, the chairman of France Euro Habitat (FREHA), the association running the building, an offshoot of Emmaüs, said, "We've been fighting for three years to rehouse these African families so that we can entirely refurbish the block of flats, but no one will take them." He claimed that flats large enough to house such big families (some are polygamous and have 10 or more children) are virtually "non-existent".

Ironically, only months ago, the newly appointed minister of finance, Hervé Gaymard, was obliged to resign after it was revealed that he was occupying a 600-square-metre flat in central Paris, at a cost of 14,000 euros a month to tax payers. The minister, entrusted by President Chirac with drastically reducing state expenditure "to increase France's competitiveness," owns a spacious flat in Paris, which he rents out, and had spurned the ministerial suite at the Ministry of Finance at Bercy.

Nicolas Sarkozy, minister of the interior and second in rank to Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, blamed illegal immigration for the tragedy. Using the time-honoured reactionary method of blaming the

victims of government neglect for their misfortunes, he told *Le Monde* August 27, "The difficulty is that a whole heap of people, some of whom are undocumented (*sans papiers*), are massing in Paris, and there are not the conditions to house them."

Contrary to Sarkozy's insinuations, the families lodged at 20 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol are all legal residents in France. They indignantly reject the notion that they are squatting. They are workers and pay their rent. Many of the women have jobs as cleaning ladies for local residents. They are not the cause but the victims of a chronic shortage of social (rent-subsidised) housing in Paris and the country as a whole.

According to Paris town hall, some 105,000 applications for social housing are in abeyance. In the Paris region, Ile de France, the figure has continuously increased since the middle of the 1990s: 264,000 in 1996, 315,000 in 2002. Some families made their application 5, even 10 years ago and beyond. Meanwhile, they have to make do with lodgings like 20 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol.

Government financial incentives for the private rental sector have failed to alleviate the problem. Successive governments and Paris municipal administrations have allowed the situation to worsen. According to the National Federation of Aid and Social Reintegration (Ferhars), in France 15,000 people live in temporary centres and there is a shortfall of 500,000 social housing units. Some 3.5 million people are living in substandard housing.

Very few communes comply with the statutory requirement to make 20 percent of their housing stock social. In Paris, for example, the ratio is only 14 percent.

The Group for the Study and Struggle Against Discrimination (GELD) has found that African families' applications for social housing have a 58 percent chance of success within six months as against 75 percent for other applicants.

The government is meanwhile discussing schemes for the sale of social housing to private owners. Property companies and speculators are amassing colossal fortunes as rents and house prices rocket in the capital.

Most of the residents of 20 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol had been living there since 1992. They were part of a group of African workers who had occupied the Quai de la Gare and the Esplanade de Vincennes in 1991 to protest against their eviction from dilapidated flats without being offered alternative housing. Known as the "101 families of the Quai du Gare," the largely West African families made headlines for months at the beginning of 1991. Camping in 26 tents close to the Finance Ministry and the construction site of the Great Library, they became a symbol of the *mal logés*, the ill-housed.

Then 20 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol was requisitioned and bought by the state to house some of the "101 families."

The then secretary of state for the budget, Christian Sauter, wrote to several of the occupants "I pledge in the name of the state to make sure that you will be definitively rehoused in no more than three years." It was on the basis of this promise that they had agreed to move into the flats. Ever since, the families have been told that no decent homes are available. It has taken this tragedy for the municipality of Paris to make a special case, and, under the glare of the spotlight trained on the disaster, they have revealed that they do in fact have available housing and will properly house the families in the immediate future.

Two buildings displaying conditions worse than those of the Vincent-Auriol tragedy are close by. At 150 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol, 250 Ivorians are living in 77 twelve-square-metre flats in the dilapidated seven-story rat- and cockroach-infested building. Several fires have been reported.

A few hundred metres away in Dunois Street, 20 families are living in an abandoned block of flats. Without heating or electricity, they cook on butane stoves, warm themselves with paraffin heaters and use candles and lamps for lighting. The town hall provides the gas bottles for each family.

Mrs. Ngitukulu speaks of a mattress that caught fire in the basement some months ago and that could have spelt disaster. She told *Libération* that her five-year-old son has friends at 20 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol and that, of course, she was worried. She felt that she was sitting on a bomb.

Many refuse to be housed in hotels because "you're not allowed to cook," said Mr. Ngitulu, who is sick of endless broken promises of rehousing.

Clearly aware of these appalling conditions, the authorities have handed over responsibility for the thousands of people in desperate need of housing to charities and NGOs, counting on the efforts of these agencies to cover up the state's own failure to provide adequate social housing.

Charities like Abbé Pierre's and the late Mother Theresa's are patronised by the most reactionary politicians and the wealthy because they make no fundamental criticism of capitalist society, encourage the passive acceptance of handouts, and thereby help prevent social explosions.

Pierre Brard, Communist Party mayor of Montreuil-sous-Bois in Seine-Saint-Denis, affirmed that the FREHA charity runs several dozen homes in his commune: "It solves impossible situations and displays a sharp sense of dialogue with people in distress."

Le Monde on August 28 quoted René Baillain's work *La Documentation française* (2004): "The intervention of the NGOs reveals weaknesses...lack of professionalisation especially in housing, weakness of financing" Above all, he wonders if the charitable organisations have not been "drawn" to promote kinds of dwellings more or less far from compliance with legal norms.

Baptiste Eyraud, the chairman of DAL (the Right to Housing), told the press that the authorities relied largely on the charitable associations to house the poor: "It's just institutionalised subcontracting. The process has been accelerating over the past two years and the government has been opening up social housing to the market. It's being demolished. It's being sold off, the rents are being deregulated."

Jean Eynaud of DAL has announced a demonstration in support of the *mal logés* in Paris Saturday. There are demands that a national day of mourning be called for the victims of the fires. DAL calls on the government to requisition empty buildings as an emergency measure and vastly expand social housing.

Jean-Louis Borloo, minister for employment, social cohesion and housing, has merely proposed the building of more hostels for the homeless. Former Socialist Party Prime Minister Laurent Fabius commented, "Housing is quality of life, dignity, security, education standards...our system is incapable of providing decent housing."

Martine Aubry, SP mayor of Lille and a leading member of Lionel Jospin's Plural Left government, also candidly admitted on France Inter radio that "no government, left or right, has really tackled the housing crisis...it's a major problem in our country."



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