

Paris: As authorities launch murder enquiry into Vincent-Auriol fire, thousands march in anger and solidarity

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The Paris public prosecutor's office has launched a criminal investigation into the blaze that killed 17 African immigrants living at 20 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol on the evening of August 25-26. Four days after the Vincent-Auriol fire, seven more Africans were killed when fire erupted in a dilapidated apartment block in Paris' Marais district.

On August 26, public prosecutor Jean-Claude Martin ruled out any possibility the fire at 20 Boulevard Vincent-Auriol could have been caused by a short-circuit, noting that the building lacked a functioning electrical system. The fire's rapid spread also excluded it having been caused by a discarded cigarette end.

Although police and fire authorities say that they have not found any traces of petrol or other combustibles in the stairwell where the Vincent-Auriol fire is known to have originated, they concede this does not mean such substances weren't used to set the building alight. Even small amounts of hydrocarbons can cause large fires, and then be washed away during fire fighters' efforts to douse the flames.

The prosecutor's decision to label the Vincent-Auriol fire "a deliberate destruction .. causing death to people" only became public when it was reported in the Sunday evening edition of *Le Monde*.

But for many, if not most, of the eight thousand who demonstrated in Paris Saturday to draw public attention to the connection between the lack of social housing, the French government's anti-immigrant policies, and the deaths of 48 Africans in three separate Paris apartment fires in the last four-and-a-half months, the launching of a criminal investigation will merely have confirmed their suspicions. The Vincent-Auriol dead were murdered.

Yet much as the demonstrators were anxious to see any persons implicated in arson apprehended, they were no less insistent that those principally responsible for the recent spate of fire deaths are the French authorities: those in government at the national and local level who have allowed tens of thousands to live in dilapidated buildings, officially pronounced unfit for human habitation.

The recent series of fires in the French capital has exposed

the existence of a large group of people, who, while not technically homeless, have been forced to seek shelter in structures that lack such basic amenities of urban life as electricity, drinking water, and toilets. These very poor, while disproportionately comprised of immigrants *sans papiers* (i.e. those whom the authorities have denied work permits), also include immigrants from outside the EU holding work and residency permits, and European and French-born workers.

The most widespread demand on Saturday's demonstration, especially from the people directly affected, was requisition—the official takeover of some of the thousands of uninhabited houses and apartments in Paris in order to house people in need and in danger. A law dating from 1948 gives the authorities full powers to do this. But local and national governments of the both the official left (Socialist Party and Communist Party) and the right have refused to use this law, out of deference to the landlords and property companies.

A leaflet, handed out by demonstrators who called themselves the "*mal-logés* (ill-housed) still alive," said the entire political establishment bears responsibility for the social crisis that produced last month's tragedies at Vincent-Auriol, Marais, and the April fire at the Paris-Opera hotel. In answer to the question, "Who are the people responsible?," the leaflet replies, "The state of course (Minister of Interior Nicolas) Sarkozy has announced the eviction of 60 squats. ... But also the Paris town hall, run by the left..."

The leaflet also indicts the SIEMP, a town-hall financed property company, "run by the chairman of the Green group on the Paris council, René Dutrey" and accuses him of being "doubly responsible for the death of the *mal-logés*."

The SIEMP "is charged with the responsibility for the eradication of conditions unfit for human habitation in the capital, but if they destroy overcrowded slum dwellings, it is in order to build a few homes where you need a salary of 1,800 euros net for a four room flat. In fact the SIEMP's real job is to clear the poor out of Paris."

The leaflet continues: "The SIEMP is more directly responsible, because it was the owner of two blocks of apartments which burned in Paris in the past few months: rue

de Pixéricourt in April and rue du Roi-Doré on the night of the 29 and 30 August”.

The leaflet accuses the charities to whom the political establishment have ceded much responsibility in the social housing field, for running “apartment buildings that are unfit for human habitation. This is the case with Emmaüs, whose offshoot *France Europe Habitat* was managing the Bouvard Vincent-Auriol building, and receiving rent without maintaining it.”

The leaflet finishes with an indictment of the left parties which control many of the Paris region’s town halls: “In Paris, the SP (Socialist Party), the Greens, the PCF (Communist Party) let the *mal-logés* die.”

The universal object of the anger of the demonstrators and survivors was Nicolas Sarkozy, chairman of the ruling UMP, leading contender for the presidency in 2007 and, as the Minister of the Interior, France’s top cop. Sarkozy has responded to the series of tragedies in Paris with contempt and brutality. In line with the neo-fascist National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen, he blames an “excessively” generous immigration policy for the fire deaths.

Under the pretext of protecting the inhabitants, he has ordered the police to evacuate by force some sixty designated squats. Those evicted have been offered accommodation for two weeks in hotels, after which they risk being thrown into the streets, since Sarkozy and the authorities have offered them no further assistance.

On Friday’s television news there were scenes reminiscent of the August 1996 smashing of the doors of the Saint Bernard church in Paris and the violent police eviction of *sans papiers*, men, women and children, who had had taken refuge there. Police forcibly entered two buildings this past Friday, one in the rue de la Fraternité (XIX arrondissement) and the other in rue de la Tombe-Issoire (XIV arrondissement).

News reports showed a building-vehicle bludgeoning open the entrance of a block of flats. A man carrying a baby emerges. Then some women exclaim: “It’s the beginning of school today. Our children are due to go to school. You can’t do this on the first day back at school!”

The 80 Africans evicted from the ironically named *rue de la Fraternité* (Fraternity Street) decided to set up camp in the Square de la Butte du Chapeau Rouge “until the promises of rehousing have been concretised.” There, with the help of the Red Cross, the district association, neighbours and friends, 18 families are living in three large tents and have access to water and toilets and, according to press agency releases, adequate supplies of food

N’Denin Coulibaly, one of the Fraternity Street evicted, told the press: “I am disgusted with Sarkozy. I found myself yesterday sleeping in a park though I have a job and permits. We were evicted on the first day of the school year. My son has the right to go to school like everyone else.”

Saturday’s march assembled at the Quai de la Gare Metro

station by the Boulevard Vincent-Auriol and made for the Place du Danube near the Fraternity Street group’s camp. They marched to the rhythm of several percussion groups, but the mood was serious, thoughtful, quietly angry and determined. A young man held up a handmade placard with photographs of president Chirac, Prime Minister de Villepin and Sarkozy with the legend in black “Fine words. People burned. Dirty war against the poor” and, in red: “Burned in 2005,” and a list of children’s names with their ages indicated.

In front of what remains of the Vincent-Auriol block of flats there was a long line of flower-bunches. Messages on the metal barrier the police had erected read: “Our children sacrificed to the god money” and “After the tragedy....they are proposing the final solution: shutting down our shelters, deportation to selection camps, expulsion.”

These sentiments were also voiced by the demonstrators. Favourite slogans were “Solidarity with the *mal-logés*,” “French, immigrants - solidarity,” “Government murderers, Sarkozy murderer,” “Apply the requisition law,” “Regularise the *sans papiers*.”

Apart from residents of squats and substandard housing, there were delegations on the demonstration from several NGOs (Catholic Aid, Emmaüs), associations fighting for the right to be housed, organisations opposing racial discrimination and for the *sans papiers* (Droits Devant, SOS racisme etc), trade unions (the FSU, CGT, SUD-Solidaires), political parties (Communist Party, Greens, the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire, Lutte Ouvriere, and some anarchist groups.) No Socialist Party contingent was visible.

A government proposal to build 5,000 temporary residences was condemned by Jean-Baptiste Eyraud of the DAL (Right to Housing): “We’re asking the government to change its policies, to forget the 5,000 shacks of shame whose construction the Prime Minister has announced....What is needed today is a massive programme of construction of social housing and, meanwhile, the requisitioning of empty dwelling.”

Neither the government nor the opposition Socialist Party have shown the slightest interest in acting on such minimal demands.

Paris: 48 African immigrants die in apartment block fires
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