

Germany: ice rink collapse leaves at least 14 dead

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Emergency services are still clearing rubble following the collapse Monday, January 2, of an ice skating hall in the German town of Bad Reichenhall, situated near the Austrian border in the southern German state of Bavaria. Latest police figures state that 14 dead have been pulled from the building, with one person still missing under the ruined remains of the centre. An additional 34 persons were injured and taken to hospital—many of them suffering broken bones.

Most of the dead were young children and youths from the locality who were making use of the skating facilities at the leisure centre. Some 50 people, most of them children enjoying the Christmas break, were skating on the rink at 4 p.m. on Monday when the roof caved in. Pictures from the scene of the tragedy show a panorama of complete devastation. The entire building has been virtually razed to the ground and rescue workers and fireman confront the risk of a further collapse of the remaining walls as they comb the building for victims.

Police have started an investigation into the cause of the collapse of the ice rink, which was first built in the 1970s. Relatives of victims and town residents reacted angrily to news that the manager of the leisure centre, concerned about forecasts of further snowfall, decided at 3:30 p.m. Monday to cancel an evening training session of the local ice hockey team as “a purely precautionary measure”—according to team captain Hubert Berger. Despite the fact that training for the hockey team was cancelled due to safety considerations, the hall remained open to the public. Had the entire building been evacuated early Monday afternoon, the disaster would have been avoided.

Following the rink collapse, the mayor of Bad Reichenhall, Wolfgang Heitmeier, immediately declared there had been no doubts that the building was structurally sound. Other local and state politicians, including Bavarian state president Edmund Stoiber, who visited the

scene of the tragedy, declared that the time was not right to look at who was to blame. Nevertheless, there are an increasing number of reports indicating structural weaknesses in the building and that discussions had been held some years earlier in the town council over the necessity of either completely renovating or pulling down the hall.

It is estimated that 30 to 40 cm of snow was lying on the roof of the leisure centre at the time of the collapse. But such amounts of snow are not unusual in the region, where up to 100 cm of snow can fall within 24 hours. The region around the town of Bad Reichenhall and southeast Bavaria is popular with skiers at this time of year. In the event, although the mayor reported that snow levels on the roof were checked Monday mid-day, no measures were undertaken to free the roof of snow.

Building experts agreed that the volume of snow was not itself sufficient to cause the 60-x-30-m roof to collapse. Gert Albrecht, building engineer and lecturer at the University of Munich, told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that he ruled out the amount of snow as the sole cause of the disaster.

A number of users of the leisure complex, which was constructed at the start of the 1970s, had formerly complained of leaks in the roof of the building. Residents living nearby reported seeing bowls and buckets being placed inside the hall to catch water running down from the roof.

As a result of the dilapidated state of the building, the complex was due to be renovated in 2003. Such renovation was repeatedly postponed, however, with Mayor Heitmeier arguing that the water from the roof was only condensation, and that immediate repairs were not necessary.

The costs of the leisure centre renovation proposed in 2003 amounted to €6 million, with the town council planning to privatise the centre and turn its running deficit

into profit.

In the event, the council decided against renovation and voted to invest funds in prestige projects such as the local Rupertus Therme spa and fitness centre (€30 million), the renovation of the town's Kurstraße (€650,000) and the building of a golf course. The plan was to attract wealthy holiday guests to the region. At the same time, it was clear that the population as a whole would be called on to share the costs of such projects.

To assist in the financing of these projects, the town council increased entrance fees for the ice skating rink and swimming pools in the town, as well as fees for the local music centre, kindergartens and parks.

Health resorts and towns like Bad Reichenhall have been hard hit as a consequence of the health reforms introduced by Germany's previous SPD (Social Democratic Party)-Green Party coalition government. Drastic cuts to the federal health budget have led to a dramatic decline in the prescribing of courses of treatment at health resorts. Previously favored as a means of preventive medicine, such spa treatments can now only be obtained on a doctor's certificate. This has meant that attendance at resorts like Bad Reichenhall has slumped.

This development has been implemented by the former and current health minister, Ulla Schmidt (SPD), heading a layer of politicians who refuse to take the slightest responsibility for the social consequences of their policies.

Under conditions where ordinary working families and the majority of the population are unable to afford treatment at a health resort, local politicians have seen fit to concentrate their efforts on encouraging the better-off. In Bad Reichenhall, this led to priority for luxury baths and shopping precincts at the calamitous expense of the local leisure centre.

The full extent of the evident negligence in the case of the leisure centre in Bad Reichenhall still remains to be uncovered. Nevertheless, the neglect and closure of basic public facilities at the expense of prestige projects for the better-off is a process that is at work throughout Germany and takes place under the protecting hand of state and federal governments—both conservative and social democratic. Not only have public facilities such as swimming pools, leisure centres, libraries and nurseries suffered from the current wave of cuts taking place at state level. Another casualty has been building supervision.

There can be no doubt that regular and thorough inspection by professional building supervisors could

have helped prevent the tragedy at Bad Reichenhall, but such supervision has also fallen victim to spending cuts at the state and federal level—and is justified at the highest political levels.

In a revealing discussion in 2004 with the chairman of the Association of German Architects (VBA), Gerhard Zach, who raised the necessity of increasing supervision at building sites, Günther Beckstein (Christian Social Union), the interior minister for Bavaria, retorted, "Controls do not help." He went on to advocate building procedures completely free of any organised state supervision and inspection: "Botched building work must be regulated through civil law, and house builders made clear what the consequences are of neglecting security standards."

Public saving measures meant that building supervision could not be extended, he continued. In general, every individual should take up more responsibility, and the role of the public sector should be reduced. "This," according to Beckstein, "would lead to more dynamism in the state and therefore to more economic growth."

In March of this year, new elections are due to decide on the post of mayor of Bad Reichenhall, and citizens of the town will have an opportunity to vote him out. In fact, the political responsibility for such tragedies as the collapse of the ice rink have their source in the budget cuts and rollback of public services decided at the highest levels of state and federal government.

There has been an outpouring of solidarity for the victims of Bad Reichenhall, with messages of sympathy from all over Germany, Europe and the US. Amongst the messages recorded in the online list of condolences established by the town is the following: "I very much regret the incident, but I hope those responsible are ruthlessly brought to justice! I hope they are confronted with compensation payments in the millions in order to finally put responsibility first over profit!"



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