

Poland: More than 60 dead following roof collapse in Katowice

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Last Saturday, just after 5 p.m., a roof covered with heavy snow collapsed at an exhibition center in the Polish city of Katowice, burying hundreds of people under the rubble and snow. Because of freezing temperatures and the failure to find any survivors for many hours, the latest death count—67 dead—is expected to rise. According to reports, hundreds if not thousands of people may have been still been in the football field-sized hall one hour before the nightly closure of the second biggest carrier pigeon exhibit in Europe.

Eyewitnesses reported that within the space of seconds the flat roof of the light alloy hall crashed down on many of those visiting the exhibition. In addition to the dead another 150 victims suffering fractures, crushed bones and other severe injuries were transported to 16 different hospitals across Upper Silesia, a mining region in central Poland.

With temperatures averaging minus 17 degrees Celsius, about minus 1 Fahrenheit, the chances of survival for anyone left in the hall are minimal. Enduring such temperatures for just a few hours is life-threatening. Rescuers reportedly called off the search for survivors by Sunday evening. According to officials the dead and injured include Poles and visitors from Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Russia, Ukraine, Holland, Belgium, Lithuania and Austria.

The Polish transport minister, Jerzy Polaczek, called the incident the worst construction disaster in the history of Poland and announced the formation of a special commission to investigate its cause. There were increasing indications, Polaczek said, that the roof had been unable to withstand the unusually high levels of snow. According to initial investigations a layer of frozen snow 50 cm (1.6 feet) thick had accumulated on the 150-meter-long flat roof. Polish news reports said the interior warmth of the building began to melt the snow, causing the wooden and concrete roof to shift and fall in on itself.

In his remarks, Polaczek refrained from mentioning why the authorities had failed to draw any lessons from recent similar disasters in Europe, including on January 2 when the roof of the ice-skating hall in Bad Reichenhall in Upper Bavaria collapsed under the weight of heavy snows, killing

15. On January 3 a supermarket roof partially collapsed under the weight of snow in the Czech Republic.

Survivors of the accident in Katowice denounced the manager of the exhibition center because emergency exits were locked and escape routes blocked after the roof collapsed. “We had to ram doors with a fire extinguisher, otherwise we would have been unable to come out at all,” reported one German victim, Heinz Richard Mennen. He had traveled with his colleague Christian Bak to the pigeon exhibition, as he had done for the last five years.

Bak, who speaks fluent Polish, reported that he told several security guards in the hall to unlock the emergency exits. “They told me they did not have keys,” he said. It was only possible to escape by breaking through the emergency exit.

The director of the Inntal rescue team, Kurt Schmalwieser, told the press agency dpa, that an offer of assistance from German rescue teams was turned down by those leading the rescue effort in Poland. Although the Polish recovery teams could only employ the services of three rescue dogs, “who were already completely exhausted,” the Polish authorities declared that assistance from the Bavarian Inntal team, and rescue teams from Munich and Cologne, was “unnecessary,” Schmalwieser stated. A representative of the Polish State Department had justified the rejection of such aid by saying that the entrance to the collapsed hall was too dangerous.

In television interviews survivors, with tears in their eyes, said they had no warning prior to the disaster. Music was playing and a friendly atmosphere prevailed among the participants, many of whom knew one another for years.

There is a long tradition of breeding carrier pigeons in the mining regions of the Ruhr, as well as in Thuringia, Upper Silesia, Belgium and Holland. In Germany, carrier pigeons are also known as the “race horse of the little man.” The extraordinary ability of pigeons to find their way across distances of several hundred kilometers has been recognized since antiquity, when they were used to carry messages. They were later employed as military message carriers, and today are bred for competition.

The Katowice gathering included a wide range of attractions for children and other family members and as a result it is feared that many children are amongst the dead and injured. The organizers of the international fair “Pigeon 2006” declared that the number of visitors exceeded 12,000.

The exact circumstances of the disaster are still not known. Constructed in 2000, the exhibition hall was the largest and newest of a total of a half dozen lightweight pavilions situated on the exhibition premises. These pavilions are used on a regular basis to sell flowers or other everyday goods.

This much, however, is certain: the causes of the accident cannot be dealt with in isolation from the rapid economic and social decline which is currently taking place throughout Poland and Eastern Europe. Since the reintroduction of the free-market, regions such as Upper Silesia have experienced a rate of impoverishment barely known in Europe. “The misfortune has hit the once flourishing industrial region of Upper Silesia,” which has been transformed over the past 15 years into “the largest crisis region in this part of Europe,” wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

There are no signs of any impending improvement. Coal mines in Poland have gone into rapid decline during the one-and-a-half decades since capitalist reunification. During the epoch of Stalinist rule this branch of industry lay at the heart of the Polish economy and mine workers were relatively privileged compared to the rest of the population. In the meantime, however, 250,000 jobs have been axed in the mining industry, wages have been cut and working conditions drastically intensified.

Unemployment benefits in Poland are scarce and insufficient for survival. The majority of the population is forced to get by somehow with an additional income—including collecting scrap metal on rubbish heaps or scabbling for lumps of coal in pits which have been shut down.

According to official data, unemployment in Poland has risen to nearly 20 percent and is twice as high for young people, at approximately 40 percent. Living conditions for a large majority of the population have worsened significantly over the past five years since the beginning of negotiations for accession to the European Union. According to official EU statistics the average Polish wage dropped from €625 per month in 2001 to €536 in 2003.

At the same time, a ruling elite has emerged in Poland, which in collaboration with European Union institutions, has been able to enrich itself enormously through the restructuring and privatization of industry, agriculture and the health services. Political decisions at all political levels, up to the highest government committees, are characterized by corruption and nepotism.

The British company Expomedia Group PLC, which runs

the exhibition halls in Katowice and another one in Poland, also manages similar premises in Germany, Holland, Hungary, Russia, India and Serbia/Montenegro. According to its company web site, Expomedia has been responsible for holding over 200 international fairs over the last few decades. Notably, the web site fails to offer any condolences or sympathy for the victims of the tragedy at Katowice.

The enterprise praises its “economical admission” to the new growth markets in Russia, Eastern Europe and India and notes its close cooperation with the German media groups Gruner & Jahr and Axel Springer, as well as the Russian-based Gazprom Media.

A host of questions remains to be answered in relation to the Katowice roof collapse: Why was there no extra examination of the hall to check its physical condition, particularly after the recent tragedy in Germany? Why wasn’t the snow accumulated on the flat roof removed in time? What safety regulations existed at the hall and were they adhered to? Who profits from the exhibition hall and the evasion of safety standards? Why were the emergency exits locked? Was this decision part of the contract with the security company in order to lower costs? Why was foreign assistance rejected?

The commission of inquiry announced by Transport Minister Jerzy Polaczek will do little to uncover the close network of favoritism and the accompanying negligence of social responsibility which dominates the Polish economy. Polaczek, a lawyer and leading member of the conservative party “Law and Justice” (PiS), can be relied upon to suppress any relevant questions regarding political responsibility in the disaster.



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