

New York City fire tragedy kills eight children, one adult

Our reporter
9 March 2007

In the latest inferno devastating the poorer sections of the American working class, eight children and one adult were killed late Wednesday night in a fire that destroyed a century-old, four-story building in which more than two dozen people lived in the Highbridge section of the Bronx, in New York City. As many as 19 people were injured and five remained hospitalized Thursday evening, three of them children still unconscious.

All the victims were members of three immigrant families from the West African country of Mali. The owner of the building, Moussa Magassa, a former carpenter in the city's school system, lived there with his wife and 11 children. Five of them, all young boys, died: Bilaly, 1; Djaba, 3; Aboukary, 6; Mahmadou, 7; and Bandiogou, 11. Moussa Magassa was visiting relatives in Mali at the time of the fire, and was informed of the tragedy in a phone call from his brother.

Fatoumata Soumare, 45, threw two of her unconscious children from windows three stories above ground to be caught by neighbors and rescuers, in a desperate effort to save their lives. Driven by the flames, she then jumped herself. Both children and their mother died.

The horrible scenes recalled the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of a century ago, when immigrant sweatshop girls jumped to their deaths to escape flames. It was the city's deadliest fire since the 1990 Happy Land social club inferno in the Bronx that killed 87 people, almost all of them Honduran immigrants.

When the fire broke out, Mrs. Soumare called her husband, Mamadou, a cab driver working the night shift, on his cell phone. He called 911, and then rushed back to the house, but too late. In addition to his wife, he lost his three-year-old son Djibril, 3, and seven-

month-old twins Sisi and Harouma. His fourth child, seven-year-old Hassimy, survived.

As in a long series of such tragedies, the social element is what stands out as the cause of the deaths: the poverty and oppression that affect tens of millions of working class families, especially pronounced in the immigrant neighborhoods of New York City, where real estate is among the most expensive in the world.

As many as four families, a total of 22 people, lived in the building at 1022 Woodcrest, a single-family house that had been subdivided into two apartments. They had left Mali, one of the poorest countries in the world, crippled by drought and a century of French colonial rule. They lived in a building that was more than 100 years old, made of wood, without working smoke detectors, and without a fire escape. Initial reports suggested that a space heater was the cause of the fire: New York City is in the midst of a near-record cold wave.

The Highbridge neighborhood is only a few blocks from Yankee Stadium, home of the most lucrative franchise in professional sports, owned by billionaire George Steinbrenner. Another billionaire, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, all but blamed the residents of the building for the fire tragedy.

"Using stoves, using space heaters, these are dangerous ways to heat a house," Bloomberg told a press conference after the disaster. "The central heating was working. It is still working. The Fire Department checked it this morning. It wasn't a case where there was not heat."

"There were two smoke detectors," Bloomberg added. "Unfortunately, neither had batteries in them." He also said that the residents had not responded to the fire in the way prescribed by fire officials—which includes shutting the door behind them if they see

flames—and they had also delayed calling 911, trying to get out of the building first.

Given that the adults were all immigrants from a French-speaking country, it is quite possible they were unfamiliar with such procedures and could have had language difficulties in calling in an alarm. There have been no reports on the families' legal status, but that could have inhibited them from calling the authorities as well.



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