

Dormitory collapse in Turkey kills 18

Our Turkish correspondent
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On August 1, at around 5:00 a.m., a gas explosion at a three-story girls' dormitory in a remote district of Konya—a city in central Turkey—led to the death of 18 girls and the injury of many others. The building, which partially collapsed, was being used for a private, unlicensed Koran-study course.

According to news reports, around 50 girls between the ages of 8 and 16 were studying there. Officials said an initial assessment pointed to a leak of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) as being responsible for the explosion.

Thirteen-year-old Merve Avci, one of the girls staying in the dormitory, told the Anatolian news agency reporter, "I was in the section of the building that did not collapse with five other friends. We felt the flames coming up from the ground floor." 12-year-old Humeysa Akdede, another injured girl, said, "We woke up for the pre-dawn prayer. Some of our friends went for a wash and a great explosion occurred there."

TV footage from the scene showed local people trying to remove the rubble from the flattened building, some using their bare hands. Later on rescue teams from different parts of the country joined the effort.

The dormitory is owned by a private foundation called Balcilar Town Course and Student Support Association, which are controlled by the religious followers of Suleyman Tunahan. One of the current leaders of the Suleymanists—one of many religious sects, which are growing in political influence in Turkey, is Mehmet Beyazit Denizolgun—a founder and deputy of Turkey's governing party, the AKP (Justice and Development Party).

According to the Turkish daily, *Radikal*, the association applied to transform the building from a boys' to a girls' dormitory four months ago. The authorities rejected the application after an investigation revealed the building had neither fire nor earthquake protections.

Moreover the capacity of the building was limited to 34 people, well below the 50 girls who lived there when the disaster occurred.

While the government and local authorities have largely turned a blind eye to such violations by religious sects, their reaction to scientific study groups has been very different. Last year authorities carried out repressive measures against the so-called "Mathematics Village," founded in a village in Izmir by Dr. Ali Nesin, the head of the mathematics department at Bilgi University in Istanbul. The founders of the village were subjected to bureaucratic pressure from the police and local authorities, with Nesin threatened with prosecution for "education without permission." One Russian mathematician, Alexandre V. Borovik, involved in the "Village" wrote, "Never in my life have I seen the arrest of blackboards encircled by a police tape, some of which were still chalked with group theory problems."

In general Turkish authorities have also turned a blind eye to the deterioration of health and safety standards in the construction of buildings and residential housing. Ugur Ibrahim Atalay, head of the Chamber of the Construction Engineer's Konya Branch, told the NTV news channel that the quality of the building material used in the Konya dormitory was substandard. He said there would have been less damage if the building had been erected according to construction regulations. "The concrete quality of the building is so bad that anything we touch falls to pieces," he said.

Poor construction has contributed to a high death toll in past disasters. These include:

- * Last year six people were killed in Istanbul when their house collapsed under its own weight.

- * In April an apartment building in Istanbul again collapsed, injuring 2 people.

- * In 2004 an 11-story apartment building collapsed in Konya under its own weight and killed 92 people. The

collapse was blamed on faulty refurbishing work.

* In May 2003 a dormitory in southeastern Turkey collapsed in a 6.4 magnitude earthquake, killing 84 students.

* In 2001 a hotel collapsed during tunnelling work on Istanbul's underground construction. Two people were killed and more than 20 were injured.



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