

Fires claim lives of seven in New York City

The Bill Van Auken
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Two deadly fires that broke out in separate working class neighborhoods of New York City over the weekend claimed the lives of seven people, four of them children.

The worst of the fires took place Saturday in an apartment in the Fulton Houses, a public housing project in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, where a family of five perished, trapped in an apartment that lacked any fire escape and where a smoke alarm had been disabled.

The fire was the deadliest seen in the city since a March 2007 inferno in the Highbridge section of the Bronx left 10 members of three West African immigrant families dead. Nine of the victims in that tragedy were children.

Once again, the victims this time were working class immigrants, in this case from Ecuador and the Dominican Republic.

The early morning fire began in the kitchen of the apartment, which was on the top floor of a seven-story building. Fire investigators later attributed it to a child playing with matches. The apartment's layout--with the kitchen next to the front door and a long hallway leading to three bedrooms and a single bathroom--turned it into a death trap, with no means of escape besides leaping from a seventh floor window.

"That fire didn't allow them to get past the door," Deputy Fire Chief James Daly told the press. "It was intense heat that trapped the family in the back."

Firefighters who responded to the blaze fought the flames in the kitchen while others equipped with air packs searched through thick smoke that they described as "ink black" until they found the family. They discovered the mother, Delkis Balbuena, 34, huddled together with her eight-year-old daughter, Nanny, in a water-filled bathtub, while a second child, three-year-old Bet-el, lay under a sink. In a bedroom they found the father, 40-year-old Maschay Joa Valdez, along with

the family's 15-month-old daughter, Ruth, and their 10-year-old son, Jonzan. The three lay under bunk beds near a window and had apparently been trying to find a way out.

Only the 10-year-old boy survived the blaze, and remains in critical condition at Jacobi Medical Center, where he is being treated in a hyperbaric chamber, designed to increase the flow of oxygen to body tissues.

Firefighters and emergency medical technicians fought to save the family, administering CPR. Witnesses described the rescuers as in tears, with one fireman falling to his knees, praying.

The second fire took place early Sunday in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, killing 33-year-old school bus driver Shawn Monderson and his nephew, Cemioni Fraser, 12, both immigrants from Guyana. Shawn had just become a US citizen and had recently moved into the third-floor apartment in Bushwick to be closer to his job. He was raising his nephew, whose mother had returned to Guyana.

The fire was caused by a candle, which erupted into flames in an apartment on the floor below, quickly engulfing the entire structure. The three-story row house on Hancock Street had been converted into a rooming house, with residents sharing bathrooms. The arrangement is not atypical in a city where soaring rents have placed decent housing out of reach for large sections of the population, and immigrant workers in particular are crowded into spaces meant for far fewer people.

The Chelsea neighborhood surrounding the project where Saturday's tragedy took place has in recent years seen the steepest increase in rents combined with the greatest number of new housing starts for any area of Manhattan. Apartments sell for \$4 million and \$5 million within blocks of the public housing, where residents pay on average \$373 a month in rent. Expensive restaurants and art galleries dot the streets

near the red brick structures of the Fulton Houses.

While ostentatious wealth abounds for a privileged social layer in Manhattan, there are mounting signs of worsening conditions within public housing, which is home to 403,000 New Yorkers at other end of the social ladder.

A series of incidents involving the elevators in the 343 apartment complexes administered by the city's Housing Authority has called attention to the overall deterioration of conditions. Last August, a five-year-old boy fell to his death in elevator shaft while trying to escape from a stalled elevator in a Brooklyn project. Last week, an 11-day-old infant died after police officers trying to rush him to a hospital got stuck in an elevator in another Brooklyn public housing complex. The cops were forced to pry open the doors and carry the baby down the stairs, losing time that meant the difference between life and death.

Elevator outages are rampant in public housing throughout the city and, as a recent survey demonstrated, they routinely fail basic inspections.

Meanwhile, as a result of funding cuts, New York public housing confronts a growing budget deficit and has been forced to lay off hundreds of employees. Planned modernization of elevators in the projects has been postponed twice since 2004 because of federal budget cuts.

The media has focused its attention in the Chelsea blaze on the disabled fire alarm in the front of the apartment, suggesting that if only the victims hadn't disabled it, they could have escaped the deadly inferno.

As other residents have pointed out, however, they are all frequently forced to disable the devices, which can be triggered by anything from cooking smoke to steam from a hot shower.

Why public housing does not provide residents with emergency exits from their apartments is another matter. In the wake of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, the 1911 industrial disaster that claimed the lives of 146 garment workers--mostly young immigrant women who were killed by the flames or jumped to their deaths--the city enacted codes that required fire escapes to provide a second egress for people in multistory buildings.

Exemptions from these requirements, however, were granted to the housing projects on the grounds that they were "fireproof" and included sprinkler systems in their

stairwells. As the fire in Chelsea tragically proved, however, under the existing system people trapped in their apartments are not fireproof and are left woefully unprotected.

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